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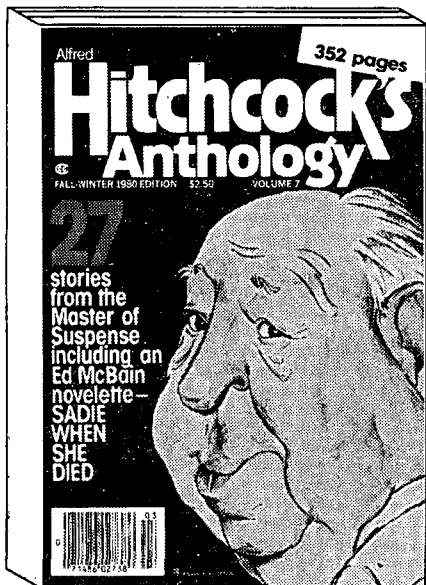
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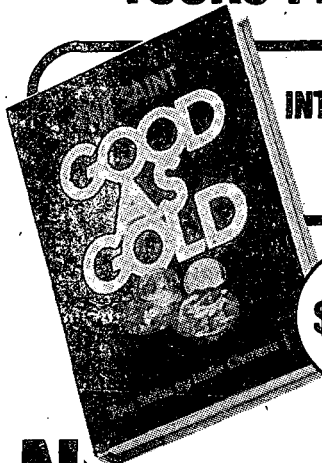
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September 8, 1980



Dear Reader:

In this issue we are delighted to present stories from both sides of the Atlantic.

Jeffrey Scott delves into the world of British spies in "Killing Martin Stover." "Weekend Retreat" by Stephen Wasyluk digs into the often dirty world of American corporate politics. You'll meet a young English girl and her eccentric uncle, a Sherlock Holmes fanatic, in "The World According to Uncle Albert" by Penelope Wallace.

The famous English scientific detective, Dr. John Thorndyke, makes a reappearance in "Murder on the Edinburgh-London Express" by John H. Dirckx. A Vietnam veteran working as a flight instructor is the hero of Gary Alexander's "The Wild Green Yonder." And, for a change of place, Carlos Bannon uncovers dark deeds on a Caribbean island in Kenneth Gavrell's "White Hibiscus."

Good reading.

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*A romantic mystery is solved by Dr. John Thorndyke . . .*

# MURDER ON THE EDINBURGH-LONDON EXPRESS

by  
JOHN H.  
DIRCKX



The visits of Superintendent Miller of the Criminal Investigation Department to Dr. John Thorndyke's chambers in King's Bench Walk usually portended Thorndyke's engagement—and mine—in the elucidation of dark mysteries and diabolical intrigues. Hence, when Miller put in an unexpected appearance late one midsummer morning, accompanied by a battered suitcase and a raffish-looking young man with ginger-coloured side-whiskers, Thorndyke and I with one accord laid aside the tasks upon

MURDER ON THE EDINBURGH-LONDON EXPRESS

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which we had been working, made our visitors comfortable, and composed ourselves to listen to some romantic and mysterious tale.

After depositing the suitcase on the floor next to his chair, Miller opened the proceedings by introducing his companion as Mr. Philip Carmold of Leicester. "Mr. Carmold," said he, "is employed by Spiller's, a large firm of saddlers and harness-makers in the Midlands, and he has had a remarkable experience which I am going to ask him to recite to you. He has been over it three times already, and if that makes it something of a bother for him to have to tell it again, at least by now he has got all the details at his fingers' ends, and can give you an outline of the story in a very few moments."

Thorndyke arranged a noteblock on the arm of his chair and took up his pen with an expectant air. "Not too succinct, if you please, Mr. Carmold," said he. "If a mere outline of the case would suffice for its solution, I fancy that you gentlemen would not be doing us the honour of this call." At that Miller gave a wink and a nod to his companion, who settled himself in his chair and began his tale forthwith.

"Two nights since, I journeyed to London in the evening express from Edinburgh," said he. "As the train was rather crowded, I was pleased at first when I found an empty compartment. Presently, though, I regretted my choice, for I discovered that the window was stuck shut, and obstinately resisted all efforts to put it down. The day had been exceedingly warm and the compartment was as close and hot as a forcing-house. Around ten o'clock I acquired a companion in suffering—a foppish little party with pince-nez and waxed moustaches, of a distinctly foreign aspect. As nearly as I could judge by the dim light from the passage and the occasional gleam of a wayside lamp, he was about fifty years of age, and he seemed much preoccupied.

"Though he did not utter a single word in all the time we spent together, he did communicate with me once. After making an unsuccessful attempt to open the window, he intimated by a sort of dumb-show that if I did not object he proposed to lay aside his coat; and that, by way of reciprocating me for this kindness, he was content to allow me the same liberty. His absolute silence and his use of gestures to communicate with me confirmed me in my surmise that he was a foreigner.

"I must have fallen asleep not long after, and, in spite of the oppressive heat, the jolting of the carriage, and the clamour of the wheels, I did not awaken until it was nearly dawn. By the faint grey light of morning I



thought I descried my fellow wayfarer huddled up in the corner of his seat, apparently fast asleep. But, as the light increased, I perceived that the man opposite me was not the one who had shared the earlier part of the journey with me, for this chap was neither so old nor so slight of build as the other. Finally, when the full light of day penetrated the compartment, I made the horrifying discovery that my new companion was not only remarkably motionless, but was likely to remain so for all time. What is more, there was a sunken purple wound just behind the crown of his head that I did not like to look at.

"As soon as I had assured myself that he was quite dead—by touching his arm, which was as heavy and lifeless as a log—I summoned the guard, who telegraphed ahead to the authorities here in London. The train was met by a police ambulance and a perfect army of detectives, and the passengers were required to give proof of their identities and submit to questioning before being permitted to leave the station. At least the rest of them were eventually turned loose, which has not been my good fortune, for I spent yesterday and last night in the lock-up—politely referred to as 'temporary custody'—and even now Superintendent Miller is speculating on the advisability of clapping the 'darbies' on my wrists."

"Come, come, Mr. Carmold," laughed Miller. "It isn't as bad as all that, and I assure you that you are a free man and may go where and when you will—that is, as soon as you have restored a certain garment to its rightful owner. The well cut and elegant coat that Mr. Carmold is wearing," he continued, turning to us, "is one of mine, which I have lent him until his own turns up. For when he came to leave the train yesterday morning, he found that his coat was missing, and in its place upon the seat lay another. It is clear that his coat has been exchanged for that of the man who shared his compartment during the earlier part of the journey—a man whose identity and whereabouts are presently a matter of great interest to the police."

"We have been in touch with the authorities in nearly all the cities and towns through which the train passed, and particularly in Leeds and Sheffield, where it stopped between midnight and four o'clock in the morning, but no one remembers seeing a traveller such as the one described by Mr. Carmold. None of the people associated with the railway line has any recollection of him either, but that is not surprising. Railway guards and booking clerks deal with so many passengers in a day's time, without taking the least notice of them, that I believe a yellow baboon

might travel by rail throughout the length and breadth of England and pass unremarked save by his fellow passengers—if there were any!”

“What of the dead man?” said I. “Can you not get some hint from his personal affairs, his associations?”

“Why, bless you, Dr. Jervis, I should give a great deal just for a hint as to his name! Not only did we find no luggage with him in the compartment, but there was not a scrap of paper on his person by which he could be identified. Of course, it is unlikely that he was altogether friendless, and in time someone is bound to report him missing, but until we can give him a name I fear we shall be able to make little or nothing of the case.”

“What were the findings at the post-mortem examination?” asked Thorndyke.

“Death was due to a blow from a blunt instrument, which caused a depressed fracture of the occipital bone. He had also a very bad heart—something about a valve stopped up—and Dr. Austrin, who did the post-mortem, said that a chap with a heart like that had one foot in the grave already.”

“Sounds like stenosis of the aortic valve,” observed Thorndyke. “Was he carrying any medicine in his pocket?”

“None. And precious little else. Some loose silver, a cheap watch, and a latchkey—that’s the lot. No papers, no letters, and barely enough money for a meal and a night’s lodging.”

“Taken with the absence of any luggage, surely that is highly suggestive of robbery?” I remarked.

“That is our view,” nodded the Superintendent in agreement. “But whether the crime was premeditated or casual, and whether it involved the theft of some particular article or merely a quantity of money, we have yet to learn.”

“Merely money!” laughed my colleague. “A cavalier attitude for a police officer to take toward the coin of the realm, which happens to supply the motive for half the crimes committed in England. You remind me of the Owl and the Pussycat, who embarked on their marine peregrinations with ‘plenty of money, wrapped up in a five-pound note.’ But come,” said he, growing serious and casting an inquisitive eye upon the suitcase that rested next to Miller’s chair, “let us have a look at the mysterious gentleman’s coat.”

“I might have known you would guess what was in the suitcase,” said

Miller, grinning broadly. "You mustn't credit him with supernatural powers, Mr. Carmold. I never visit Dr. Thorndyke without bringing along some cast-off article of clothing or stray bit of personal jetsam, and you will recall that I have already mentioned the coat as being in our possession." He laid the suitcase across his knees, raised the lid, and lifted out the garment in question, which proved to be in the last stages of disintegration.

"I cannot but think that our mute gentleman of the pince-nez has profited by the exchange," said Thorndyke, with a humourous glance at Carmold. "This is indeed a coat of many colours. That is ink upon the sleeve—a cheap grade, and watered at that. Here we have coffee, and this looks very much like egg. He may have appeared foppish in the semi-darkness," he concluded, "but in broad daylight the owner of this coat must have looked as shabby as a street beggar." He placed the coat flat upon the table and subjected it to a methodical examination.

"Of course, we've been all over that coat down at New Scotland Yard," said Miller, "but I know that sometimes you can find a thing that a hundred others in succession have overlooked, Dr. Thorndyke, and as our investigation is taking us nowhere, I thought I could not do better than let you have a try at tracing the owner of the coat."

"It is certainly either of foreign cut," observed Thorndyke, "or a survival from the 1860's—which, in view of its dilapidated condition, is not a wholly unreasonable surmise. There is no maker's label, nor does it appear that there ever was one." From an inner pocket of the coat he withdrew a folded linen handkerchief and spread it out upon the table. By the soiling along the creases, it was obvious that the handkerchief had been carried in that pocket for a very long time without receiving the attentions of the washerwoman. It was otherwise perfectly clean except for a number of short, curved hairs clinging to its surface.

"He has evidently been in the habit of cleaning his pince-nez with this handkerchief," remarked Thorndyke, "for these little hairs, all of a uniform length and curvature and all tapering to a point at each end, are unmistakably eyebrow or eyelash hairs."

When he had taken possession of two or three of these hairs and carefully sealed them up in a seed envelope, he replaced the handkerchief and turned his attention to the other pockets. The findings were extremely sparse. In the left-hand pocket was a worn and greasy leather case containing absolutely nothing but the cabinet photograph of a middle-aged

lady, charming in a somewhat austere fashion. Though the margins of the portrait were frayed and discoloured, the photographer's name—Willlaerts of Antwerp—was clearly legible, and Thorndyke raised an inquiring eye to Miller.

"Nothing there," said the Superintendent with a shake of his head. "Out of business for many years, records not available. The photograph is at least twenty years old."

"What have we here?" I asked, as Thorndyke produced from the opposite pocket what appeared to be a wad of waste paper.

"What we have here," he replied, "is an ounce of coarse tobacco done up in a screw of newspaper—a Dover paper, dated six weeks back. Thanks to the skill and discretion of the persons who examined this paper at the Yard, it is possible to be relatively certain that it was originally twisted by a left-handed person. Of course you are already looking into that?"

"We are," said Miller, "but I needn't tell you that in six weeks' time a Dover newspaper may have been to the ends of the earth and back, and if we must undertake an all-out search for a left-handed tobaccoist it will be as a last resort. But we did weigh the tobacco, and it's a full ounce—in fact, a few grains over—which suggests that he had just purchased it."

Thorndyke took up a few shreds of the tobacco between his thumb and forefinger and sniffed at them before depositing them in a specimen jar. "It seems fresh enough," said he. "Did your fellow traveller smoke in the train, Mr. Carmold?"

"No, sir, and it's a mercy he did not, for I can't abide tobacco myself, and with the window shut I should have quite suffocated if he had been smoking. No, sir, he looked neither right nor left, but just sat staring at a paper in his lap, which it was too dark to read."

"I suppose you could not tell what paper it was?"

"No, but it looked something like one of those little French papers, all long and narrow."

At these latter remarks Mr. Miller had suddenly pricked up his ears, and now he gave Carmold a sharp look. "We've heard nothing of that paper before now, have we, Mr. Carmold?" he asked pointedly.

"I've only just remembered it. I told you about his luggage—a sort of portmanteau with a leather strap, and a smaller case that he placed next to him on the seat."

"The railway carriage in which the murder was committed has been

taken out of service," said the Superintendent. "Nothing of the slightest importance has been turned up, though our men have taken the compartment in question literally to pieces. They did find a cloth cap, which had fallen under the seat and been overlooked earlier. It is evident that the murdered man was wearing that cap when he was struck down, for it has a patch of blood and hairs on the lining just where it would lie over the lethal wound. If you would like to come and examine the carriage this morning, Dr. Thorndyke, I am sure you are welcome to do so; otherwise we shall have to let the railway people put it back into service."

"Just when I am thoroughly absorbed in this coat, you ask me to chuck it up and go look at a railway carriage," grumbled Thorndyke good-naturedly. "Very well, but first let me take some samples of the lint from the pockets. It is almost certain to be useless, for the coat has not been cleaned or even brushed for months, and it will have acquired a pretty heterogeneous collection of dust and similar particulate rubbish, but we are obliged to make the examination all the same."

In a very few minutes he had secured the desired specimens, which did indeed look like gleanings from an assortment of dustbins. Having sealed them up in a series of carefully labelled packets, Thorndyke returned the coat to Miller and signified his readiness to proceed to the railway yard.

The fatal carriage had been led off into a siding above Broad Street Station, closely adjacent to Appold Street. As we approached by a path alongside the metals, I observed two men in earnest conversation outside the door of the carriage. One of them was a policeman in uniform, who touched his helmet respectfully to the Superintendent; the other presently identified himself as an official of the London, Midland and Scottish Railway.

When the official, whose name was Shorter, learned that he was talking to Superintendent Miller of the C.I.D., he expressed considerable satisfaction at the meeting. "I hope, sir, that you are going to let us put this carriage back into service," said he. "I gather that the decision rests with you, for whenever I have made inquiries of the detectives who have been prowling about the station and pulling the carriage to pieces, I have been told that they can do nothing without the approval of Superintendent Miller."

"You may have your carriage back in a very few minutes," Miller

announced genially. "These gentlemen are scientific investigators who would just like to look over the compartment where the murder took place."

The railway official, now more cordial than ever, invited us with "nods and becks and wreathed smiles" to enter the carriage, and went off in the direction of the station. As we were mounting the iron stair, we met a mechanic just coming out, a grease-besmeared young fellow clutching a bulky tool chest.

"Here, you," said Miller sharply to the man; "you're not one of our people, are you?"

"It's all right, Superintendent," said the police officer, touching his helmet again. "This chap is a regular mechanic of the London, Midland and Scottish line, and Mr. Shorter brought him round himself. They wanted to see to the stuck window while the carriage was out of service."

"And have you put it right?" asked Miller, turning again to the mechanic.

"Yes, indeed, sir. Only fancy, someone had dropped a penny piece into the slot behind the catch." From his slight hesitation before announcing the value of the offending coin, I judged that it was probably at least a half-crown, and I further speculated that it reposed at that moment in an inner pocket of his grimy outfit, whence it would very likely pass ere long into the hands of some jovial tapster.

The scene of the tragedy looked much like any other first-class compartment, except that the floor had been swept and the seats brushed up to a degree of spruceness not often seen by the traveller. In contrast to the spic-and-span appearance of the compartment itself, the window bore a number of oily fingermarks, for the mechanic had evidently not considered it part of his duties to clean it after making his repairs.

Thorndyke began his investigations at the window, releasing its catch and moving it up and down several times in its grooves. With his Codrington lens he examined first the dark smudges upon the glass and then some shallow abrasions in the finish of the frame just next to the catch, even scraping a few loose fragments of varnish into a seed envelope and storing them away in his pocket case.

"Thoroughness, you see, is Dr. Thorndyke's passion," remarked Miller in a bantering tone to Carmold, who stood next to him in the passage. "Even though the murder took place the night before last, the doctor wants to assure himself that this mechanic who has just been here, and



who probably never clapped eyes on this carriage in his life until an hour ago, is not mixed up in the business in some way."

Without taking the least notice of these words, Thorndyke went about his work, an inscrutable and introspective smile just perceptible on his lips. Having taken a few measurements with a spring tape, he made a sketch of the compartment in his notebook. Then he went down on his hands and knees and peered under the seats with the aid of a little pocket lamp.

He next turned his attention to the luggage racks. After spreading his pocket handkerchief on one of the seats so as not to soil the newly brushed upholstery, he grasped the ornamental boss at one extremity of the rack overhead, hauled himself up, and, standing upon the seat, shone his lamp into the gloomy recess above the rack. Presently he repeated the proceeding on the opposite side of the compartment, and then signified to Miller that he had concluded his researches.

The body of the murdered man had been taken from the railway station to the mortuary at St. Bartholomew's Hospital for the post-mortem examination, and there it still lay awaiting identification. As the hospital was almost on our way, Thorndyke proposed a visit there. Miller pleaded other business, but readily assented to our examination of the corpse and its personal effects. Mr. Carmold begged to advise us that he had already seen quite enough of the deceased gentleman, and would be at his hotel if required.

Nevertheless we all set out together from the station in a taxicab. Somewhat to my surprise, Thorndyke seemed to take a profound interest in a morning paper someone had left upon the seat. Normally he eschewed newspapers—in fact, he had more than once, in moments of levity, referred to journalists and their readers as, respectively, "the Scribes and the Pharisees." But the reason for his sudden absorption in matutinal ephemera became obvious when he held up a blatant headline for us all to read: SHOCKING MURDER IN A RAILWAY CARRIAGE.

"There is a very full treatment of the case here," he said, "though I see no mention of the coat."

"Nor will you find any in the afternoon papers," commented Miller. "That is our trump card, and we have gone to some lengths to assure that Fleet Street does not get hold of it before we have played it."

For the remainder of the journey Thorndyke appeared completely

immersed in the newspaper account of the murder. Before we parted from the others, he invited them to come round to our chambers again that evening, when he hoped to be able to hand Miller the solution of the shocking murder and to restore to Carmold his errant coat.

"And what about the owner of this other coat?" asked Miller, thumping the suitcase that lay in his lap.

"I think I can promise to introduce him to you," said Thorndyke. "And provided that you bring his property along and are prepared to give it up to him, there should be no difficulty about persuading him to return Mr. Carmold's coat."

Miller subjected Thorndyke to a hard scrutiny and appeared to be on the verge of asking some very pointed questions, but, evidently foreseeing that they would only receive evasive replies, he held his peace and promised to call at the appointed hour.

Thorndyke had bidden the driver to pull up in Newgate Street just in front of the General Post Office, and when we alighted he entered that sprawling edifice before proceeding to the hospital. After a preliminary stop at one of the writing tables, he handed in a telegraph form, whereupon the clerk, a peppery little man with a tic, having first raised some objections which Thorndyke speedily answered, collected the fee and went off to dispatch the message, muttering something to himself about "talking like a Christian."

By great good fortune we encountered Dr. Austrin, the police surgeon, in the Pathological Department of St. Bartholomew's Hospital. The surgeon, an old friend of ours, accompanied us into the mortuary and gave orders for the attendant to bring out the body and to unlock the cabinet in which the clothing had been placed. In response to a query from my companion, Austrin confirmed that the deceased had suffered from stenosis of the aortic valve.

"In fact, it was that which killed him, as much as the blow on the head. It is true that there is a depressed fracture of the occipital bone, but the inward displacement of the inner table is very slight, and the amount of haemorrhage might almost be called negligible, if that word could ever be used of bleeding inside the cranium. I think it unlikely that such a wound would have proved mortal to a healthy man. Probably the shock of the blow was just sufficient to upset fatally an already deranged state of the circulation."

He drew back the heavy canvas cover from the trolley that the attendant

had wheeled into the viewing room, revealing the body of a very tall, muscular, barely middle-aged man. The flesh of the face had begun to sink in, and the skin was mottled all over by far-advanced livor mortis. Thorndyke stood for some moments regarding the body with that air of solemnity and reflection that he customarily wore in the presence of death.

"What do you make of this?" he asked at length, raising the deceased's right hand from the trolley. The surgeon and I both drew near and examined the member in question. Two fingernails were split right down to the quick, and a third appeared to have been bent back and a part of its free margin torn away. The index finger of the left hand showed a similar injury.

"He must have tried to defend himself," said Austrin with a shrug. He watched in indulgent silence while Thorndyke took some scrapings from the injured nails and carefully stored them away.

"Still," I objected, "it is apparent that he was struck from behind. And then, for all his cardiac trouble, he had the frame of a fish porter, and unless his assailant were stark mad he would be sure to take him unawares."

Austrin grunted a dubious assent. "How the deuce do you take a man unawares in a first-class compartment?" he asked.

"Why, he may have been asleep, just as the other man, Carmold, appears to have been at the time of the murder. He may even have been struck down in the passage and his body deposited in the compartment afterward."

"I wonder," came the voice of Thorndyke from across the room, "whether my learned junior can explain why a man would board a train in the middle of the night with nothing but the clothes on his back, six shillings ninepence halfpenny, a cheap but apparently brand-new watch, and a brass latchkey on a short chain adorned at its nether end with a small piece of indifferently executed scrimshaw." As he spoke he laid out the deceased's scanty effects in a row upon the table.

"The police are fairly certain that he was robbed," said Austrin. "With no luggage in evidence, no return ticket on his person, and barely enough money to exist on for a couple of days in London, that seems an inescapable conclusion. I say, Thorndyke, you seem deucedly interested in that coat."

"Yes, I fear I have rather got coats on the brain lately," replied my

colleague. He made no direct reference to the one that he had examined earlier that morning—in compliance, I supposed, with Miller's tactic of secrecy on that subject. In what seemed a wholly superfluous expenditure of time and energy, he removed samples of the lint from the various pockets of the deceased's clothing and stored away each in its own seed envelope before taking his leave of Austrin and the silent occupant of the trolley.

Our lunch was rather an abbreviated affair, for Thorndyke seemed eager to return to our chambers and undertake the examination of the morning's harvest of specimens. When I reflected that Miller and Carmold were expected at eight o'clock, and that Thorndyke had practically promised to hand over the murderer to the Superintendent and the missing coat to his young charge, I could not but marvel at the magnitude of the task that lay before him, and at his extraordinary confidence in his ability to perform it in so short a time.

All the afternoon Thorndyke and his familiar, Polton, were closeted in the laboratory, and though they both put in a brief appearance at tea-time, they were about as communicative as a couple of undertaker's mutes. Around half-past five a telegram arrived for Thorndyke, which I had no doubt was the reply to his own of the morning. Resisting the temptation to unseal the envelope (a proceeding that would infallibly have been detected by my astute senior), I carried it up to him, and observed a smile of satisfaction spread across his normally impassive features as he perused the flimsy and thrust it away in his pocket. Though I made some effort to spy out the lay of the land by casting a sharp eye over the various pieces of apparatus set out upon the long laboratory bench, I could make no more intelligent surmise as to the overall purport of the operation than an aborigine who had blundered into a piano-factory.

By supper-time Thorndyke appeared to have completed the bulk of the investigation, for both he and Polton wore contented smiles which, for sheer smugness, would have put the Cheshire cat to shame. Just as the Treasury clock was striking eight our guests appeared. After a brief and almost perfunctory ritual involving the whisky decanter and siphon, Thorndyke led them away upstairs to the laboratory floor, intimating by a nod that my presence there would also be welcome. As I ascended the stairs at the rear of the party, I noted with some curiosity that Polton remained below, ostensibly engaged in putting the sitting room in order.

I had expected to witness some elaborate demonstration, and so, perhaps, had the Superintendent, for he seemed disappointed when we entered the laboratory to find only a solitary microscope set out upon the bench. Very different was the effect produced upon Carmold by the spectacle of a complete chemical laboratory, with adjacent shops and stores, in the Inner Temple. He was quite dumbfounded, and stood peering wonderingly round at the long, businesslike bench, the serried ranks of reagent bottles, and the rows of gleaming chemical glassware upon the shelves.

As Thorndyke stepped up to the bench, I noted that the instrument standing there was a comparison microscope—actually a pair of microscopes mounted side by side, with a common stage. The ordinary stage had been removed, and the instrument fitted with a warming stage and an adjustable mirror so placed as to cast light obliquely upon the specimens from above. As for the specimens themselves—one for each eye of the observer—they appeared to be mere transparent films of some viscous material spread thinly upon two glass plates.

When he had opened the valve that allowed hot water to circulate through the chamber under the stage, and taken a reading from the tiny thermometer mounted thereon, Thorndyke invited each of us in turn to peer through the twin barrels of the instrument. I know not what my companions made of the specimens, but to me their aspect under the microscope lenses was no more enlightening than when they were viewed by the naked eye. As I bent over the heated stage I was conscious of a warm, faintly aromatic vapor rising from the plates.

“What’s it all about, then?” asked Carmold, taking a second turn at the instrument. “I say, though, it’s different now—moving, like.”

“The material is melting,” explained Thorndyke. “By means of the comparison microscope Polton and I have verified that both specimens soften at exactly the same temperature, sixty-five degrees centigrade, and that both are completely liquid at eighty degrees.”

When we had all confirmed these observations, without in the least understanding their significance, Thorndyke shut off the gas jet under the water heater and carefully lifted the plates off the warming stage with a pair of tongs, placing them upon a shelf to cool. While he was doing so the laboratory bell rang sharply twice, but he appeared to take no notice. Instead, he went on with his exasperating explanations, which were no explanations at all.

"Not only can we state positively that the specimens on the two plates have identical melting points, but, taking that fact in conjunction with other observed physical properties, we can identify them both with some assurance as a resin produced by the larvae of the lac insect, *Carteria lacca*."

"Good Lord, sir!" exclaimed Carmold in astonishment. "Is that going to lead to the solution of this beastly business, or is it just another mystery to add to the rest?"

Thorndyke made no answer but, smiling solemnly, ushered us back to the sitting room. Polton was nowhere in sight, but in the chimney corner an elderly gentleman with silver-rimmed pince-nez and waxed moustaches sat puffing his pipe in an attitude of contemplative abstraction. Miller and I paused a little awkwardly in the lobby, while Carmold stood stock still upon the threshold, his eyes fairly starting from their sockets.

Thorndyke advanced to greet the stranger and, after conversing with him for a few moments in fluent French, turned and presented him to us. "Gentlemen, allow me to introduce Monsieur Achille Lebesque, schoolmaster, lately of Ghent and presently stopping at the George Hotel, St. Albans. Monsieur Lebesque regrets that he has no English, but he will cheerfully answer questions put to him in French, German, Dutch, Latin, or Greek."

"I believe," said Carmold in an awed tone, addressing Thorndyke, "that you must be in league with the Powers of Darkness, for this is the very man with whom I came up in the train the night before last, and that is my coat that he is wearing at this moment."

At this, Miller's interest in M. Lebesque became positively proprietorial. He took the chair just beside the one occupied by the Belgian, eyeing him sternly but refraining from any further display of constabulary zeal in expectation of some sort of explanation from Thorndyke.

Polton appeared presently with coffee and brandy for the newcomer and a plate of seed cakes, but these refreshments received scant attention amid the general curiosity. Thorndyke undertook to sort out the tangled strands of the affair. We all had at least a smattering of French, and although M. Lebesque clung doggedly to the mistaken notion that the best way to be understood by Englishmen was to speak very loudly in Dutch—or, rather, the Flemish *patois*—we made shift to understand one another very well.

"At the outset," said Thorndyke, "it is necessary to observe that Mon-



ieur Lebesque is not guilty of murder, nor of any other crime more serious than stepping off the Edinburgh-London express at Willesden Junction in possession of another man's coat. But of that, more anon.

"The demonstration that you have just now witnessed in the laboratory showed that two specimens of material from very different sources displayed identical melting points. The specimens also behave in identical fashion in a variety of solvents. One of them consists of material that I took from under the fingernails of the body at the mortuary this morning, and the other I had collected a little earlier from the window of the compartment in which the deceased was apparently murdered.

"I say 'apparently,' for I hope to convince you that the death was entirely accidental." Miller frowned deeply, but said nothing. "As Monsieur Lebesque has told us, around one o'clock in the morning he left the compartment in which Mr. Carmold was sleeping in search of more comfortable quarters. We have heard that the compartment was exceedingly stuffy, and in case your acquaintance with French does not extend to the verb *ronfler*, I may just remark in passing that it means 'to snore.' "

Mr. Carmold, grinning a little foolishly, brushed up his exuberant side-whiskers until he looked like a particularly jocular red fox, but made no comment.

"Some time afterward another passenger happened along. He must either have boarded the train at Leeds or Sheffield, or, like Monsieur Lebesque, have decided in mid-journey to change his accommodations. Entering the compartment occupied by Mr. Carmold, he at once perceived the desirability of opening the window. When it resisted ordinary efforts he endeavoured to force it.

"We learned from the railway mechanic this morning that a coin had fallen into the catch mechanism. It seems likely that the traveller, observing that the window was not drawn up tight, attempted to unstick it by forcing it quite shut. The frame of the window was heavily coated with ordinary shellac, so that he must have had some difficulty in getting purchase on it with his fingers. Remember that it was dark, and moreover the train may have lurched at the critical moment. He was apparently a man of great physical strength, and the abrupt loss of his grip on the window must have caused the upper part of his body to recoil with considerable violence so that his head struck the round boss at the end of the luggage rack above the seat. The size and shape of the wound as well as its location accord perfectly with that hypothesis. The state of the

deceased's fingernails and the presence of material on them identical with the slightly abraded shellac upon the window frame afford further confirmation. Though powerful of limb, the deceased had a dangerous heart condition, and the force of the blow, which actually fractured his skull was evidently sufficient to precipitate some irreversible derangement of the circulation. That is the opinion of Dr. Austrin, who performed the post-mortem, and I am entirely in agreement with it."

Miller regarded the Belgian with an eye from which the last vestige of suspicion had not entirely melted away. "This gentleman says he left the express at Willesden Junction, does he?" he asked.

"He does. That explains why he was not found by the detectives who boarded the train at Broad Street Station. In his search for a cooler and quieter compartment, Monsieur Lebesque encountered a Frenchman who had resided in London long enough to have some understanding of the railway system. When his fellow traveller learned that his destination was St. Albans, he advised Monsieur Lebesque to leave the train at Willesden Junction."

"The Edinburgh-London express," Miller announced gravely, "does not stop at Willesden."

"It did so yesterday morning. A local train of the North London line was running late and was actually passing over the junction as the express approached. The express was obliged to stop until the permanent way was clear before proceeding to Broad Street Station, and in that interval Monsieur Lebesque and his friend persuaded a guard to unlock the carriage door and hand him out of the train. As it was a somewhat irregular proceeding, the guard no doubt resolved to keep quiet about it—especially when he learned that the man was suspected of murder.

"But for reasons that you already know, I am confident that even when the deceased has been identified, the only conclusion that a coroner's jury can possibly entertain will be 'death by misadventure.'"

"He has been identified," said Miller. "Not two hours ago a Mrs Leggatt arrived from Leith and identified him as her father, Josiah Whitbread. He has not been quite right in his mind of late, according to the daughter, and has wandered off once or twice before, but never before so far astray as this. She read of the supposed murder in a London paper, and, as her father had not been seen since the day before yesterday, she thought it likely that he and the body in the railway carriage were one and the same man."

"You might have told us that before," said Thorndyke in a tone of genial reproof. "You are growing positively secretive, Miller."

"Why, Dr. Thorndyke, it is generally a waste of breath to tell you anything, for you seem to know it all beforehand. And in any event, I was not so interested in the identity of the dead man as in that of the proprietor of this coat, though I see now that that was merely a red herring.

"Talking of the coat—how in the name of all that is wonderful did you succeed in tracing its owner among the eight million inhabitants of the metropolis in a matter of eight or ten hours?"

Carmold appeared positively breathless in anticipation of Thorndyke's answer, while the Belgian, who clearly sensed its purport, broke out in a broad smile and puffed his pipe with an air of ineffable drollery.

"You are not going to like the answer to that question, Miller," Thorndyke warned him. "But as in the course of time it must inevitably come to the ears of the police, you may as well have it from me. I learned the identity of the owner of the coat from that copy of *The Times* that we found in our taxicab this morning."

Amid a storm of incredulous protests, my colleague turned down a few leaves of our own copy of *The Times*, which lay upon the table, and pointed to two advertisements neatly outlined in red:

Lost, Edinburgh-London express, Tuesday night: grey morning coat containing valued portrait photograph; if found apply Achille Lebesque, George Hotel, St. Albans.

And, directly below:

Found, Edinburgh-London express, Tuesday night: grey morning coat containing pack of playing cards and silver penknife, initials P.C.; owner apply Achille Lebesque, George Hotel, St. Albans.

"These advertisements appeared in nearly all the morning papers," said Thorndyke, "and in the *Evening Standard* and *The Star*."

"Do you mean to say," cried Miller, "that we have had every police officer and railway guard from Dover Cliffs to John o' Groat's searching for the owner of this coat—" he bestowed a contemptuous kick upon the

suitcase that reposed on the floor before his chair "—when all the while the name of the owner has been staring us in the face out of every paper in London? Snakes! It's enough to make a man turn pastrycook!"

"An instance of the devastating effect of bias," observed Thorndyke demurely. "The police were so thoroughly convinced that a murder had been committed by the owner of the coat they never imagined that he would advertise to recover it. But Monsieur Lebesque, who could not read the London papers, knew nothing of the supposed murder. Moreover, the persons to whom he applied for assistance, and who helped him draught his advertisements, could not have known that a coat had been found in the compartment with the dead man, for the simple reason that the police very carefully withheld any information on that point from the journalists."

"Snakes!" exclaimed the Superintendent again. "What a sell! And are we to understand that all your mumbo-jumbo with little packets of dirt and muck from this place and that have had nothing to do with finding Monsieur Lebesque here?"

"Nothing whatever," admitted Thorndyke. "But of course I had no way of knowing at the commencement of the investigation which data would prove useless, and so I was obliged to consider them all. Have you ever seen a dog trying to follow up a scent at a crossroads? Even when he has exhausted all but one possible branching of the route, he methodically applies his nose to that one also before following it up. The dog, you see, is unencumbered by anything resembling the faculty of logical reasoning, and though that deficiency may on rare occasions place him at a disadvantage in his dealings with the species that goes upon two legs and keeps kennels, it at least ensures his absolute freedom from prejudice, preconception, and bias."

"I say—well done, sir!" exclaimed Carmold, rapping the table with his fist. "The Superintendent may scoff if he likes, but I believe you are endowed with faculties that other men do not enjoy—nor dogs either! And now, if Mr. Miller will kindly return Monsieur Lebesque's coat, I shall be happy to resume possession of my own before our delightful Belgian schoolmaster—" this with a cordial smile and a bow in the direction of the gentleman in question "—spills any more of his ashes over the front of it."

There ensued a ceremony that must have appeared to one outside our little company like some grotesque species of round dance executed by

a troupe of lunatics. Miller first produced the tattered and spattered coat from his suitcase and tendered it to Monsieur Lebesque. Then, with Thorndyke and me acting as *valets de chambre*, the Belgian in his turn removed Carmold's coat and restored it to its owner—whereupon that gentleman divested himself of the coat he had borrowed from Miller, who carefully folded it away in the suitcase.

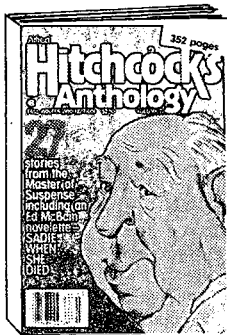
When everyone was clothed again in his proper raiment, we reversed the proceedings of the wayward children of Israel, as, having risen up to play, we sat down to eat and drink.



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*She had to make the intruder believe her . . .*

# WHO'S THERE?



## MONET GREEN ADAMS

Marsha Hunter, prudent, far-seeing, would ordinarily have hooked the screen door after her husband went off to help the Millers with their barn. But that day, she had been upset by their argument—too annoyed with Bob even to give him a quick kiss at the door. She had just stood at the sink and said goodbye over her shoulder as he went out.

Her pretty face was still set in lines of exasperation as she dried the last of the dishes and tidied the kitchen. In her mind, she went over the



argument again, hearing Bob say that Billy spent too much time indoors scribbling stories about imaginary dangers when he ought to be outdoors getting exercise and learning to cope with the real problems of running a farm. A little ashamed, she recalled her own angry words, throwing up to Bob that he couldn't understand Billy's wanting to be a writer because he couldn't understand anything that didn't have obvious and immediate practical value. *She* knew what it was like to have ambitions like Billy's; *she* could understand.

She flung her apron down and turned her back on the shining kitchen and went into the living room where her sewing machine was set up. She had a part in the community play—the imperiled heroine, kidnapped during an Indian attack and rescued dramatically by the hero, who found her sunbonnet marking the right fork in the trail for him to take to find the Indian's secret camp. Oh, it was raw melodrama, all right, but she enjoyed it and had looked forward to finishing her costume today. Now the pleasure was a little spoiled for her, but she grimly pushed that thought from her mind.

She stepped over her ten-year-old son, sprawled out on the floor painstakingly copying out another story. She scooped up the sunbonnet and sat down at the machine to work on it. Instead of asking her usual interested questions about Billy's story, she said crossly, "For heaven's sake, why don't you sit at the table to write?"

Billy didn't answer. He was frowning at the pattern of the rug as he tried to work out some detail in his mind. With one worn sneaker, he scratched at the other; he gnawed on the end of his pencil and muttered to himself. After a minute he rolled over on his back, reached out with his foot, and snaked out the white ruffled curtain that hung to the floor. He stared at the sunlight coming through it and said, "I guess I'll never be a writer. A real writer wouldn't get stuck like I do."

"Let the curtain alone," she ordered over the hum of her machine. Billy looked at her with surprise and hurt, then began to gather his papers together and put them away. She knew she should stop sewing and help him, as she usually did, but now neither of them was in the mood. Still, she didn't want to dampen his determination, so she stopped the machine.

"I'm sorry, honey. I'm just in a bad mood," she said apologetically. And then more warmly she added, "Of course you'll be a writer. Everybody gets stuck once in a while."

He gave her shoulder the awkward pat that had somehow lately re-

placed embarrassing hugs and kisses, and said he guessed he'd go down by the creek for a while. As he took his jacket from the doorknob and shrugged into it, he showed that he forgave her by asking, "What would you do if some crooks had a gun in your back and made you call up someone and tell them to pay your ransom?"

"I'd do just that."

"Yeah, but if you didn't really want the money paid because you thought you could get away, how would you tell them not to believe you?"

"I guess—well, I'd say something that the person I was talking to would know wasn't true."

"Like what?" he persisted.

"Oh"—she stopped the machine and frowned in thought—"something like 'Take care of Butch, my dog,' when I didn't have a dog; or 'Tell Carolyn not to worry,' when I didn't know anyone by that name. How's that?"

"Hey, that's keen." He grinned. "Thanks." He started out the front door, then turned back, asking, "How long till supper?"

"Daddy will probably be late. We'll eat without him as soon as I finish this sewing."

"Can I have a sandwich now then?"

"No," she said. "You wait."

As he closed the door behind him she slipped on a thimble and began the hand stitching on the lining. The winter sun began to slip low and draw itself gently from the living room and the only sound was the methodical prick of her needle through the stiff lining and the ticking of the kitchen clock—she'd always called it the heartbeat of the house.

Wrapped in her own thoughts, she had nearly completed one side of the bonnet when she heard the slight whine of the spring on the kitchen screen. She waited for the usual slam that always announced Billy. But the closing was soundless. She paused and listened and wondered if he was tiptoeing in on a silent raiding trip to the refrigerator or the bread box. Either would give him away with its own sound, and she knew them all by heart. With her needle suspended between stitches, she waited. What had been comfortable stillness began to be weighted with something else—uncertainty, the first little ripple around a pebble of doubt. This is silly, she thought. It's Billy up to a game of scaring me. He does that all the time. She decided to play along with him this time, but later she'd tell him he was too big for such childish games. She lowered her eyes

to her work again and took several stitches, and then suddenly she knew Billy could never be so slow in any game. It wasn't Billy and it wouldn't be Bob; he'd come in noisily. Her nearest neighbor, Muriel, would open the screen and call out first, "Hey, anybody home?" The thought that someone was standing in the kitchen, listening as intently as she was, filled her with an apprehension that made calling out impossible. She put one hand on the machine to steady herself. She started to rise. She sank back as he swung into the doorway.

"Not a sound!" he warned. It wasn't the gun so much as his voice that held the threat—sharp, like a knife, with the tightness of death in it.

She thought, How long will I sit here frozen? There were all sorts of things she should say: "Who are you? What do you want? How dare you!" but they all seemed unnecessary and she couldn't say anything. Only her mind could move and it raced like something out of order, taking in disconnected impressions: A big man, sandy complexion, broad chest and powerful shoulders—a jacket that's not his. Too small. Past the gun, back to his face. A thin slash of a mouth, tight at the corners, but the eyes—there's the danger! Light eyes, almost colorless. Eyes that are hard. Eyes that mean business! Her thoughts took another crazy twist. This is real! It isn't something that might happen. It's something that is happening.

That second seemed a lifetime, then he spoke in the taut voice of a desperate man. "Do exactly as I tell you or I'll kill you."

Her body was still paralyzed, but her mind was coming out of its frantic race of fear. It was beginning to accept the situation as reality and to function again, cautioning her. Easy! He's like something wound too tight. Try to be natural. Go slow. Easy!

She took her eyes from the gun, allowed herself the breath she had been holding, and slowly put her hand to her face as if brushing away a greater threat than he presented. Perhaps it was a ridiculous gesture. Perhaps he would interpret it as defiance or stupidity, but at the same time it placed a subtle burden of trust in him; a sort of, "Thank goodness, it's only you," as if he were a neighbor who had startled her, a neighbor who didn't hold a gun and who would never harm her.

"Give me a minute," she said slowly. "Give me a minute to stop shaking. I've never been so scared."

"You got reason to be scared." His eyes were narrowed and his words were hissed between clenched teeth.

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She nodded weakly and said, "If it's money you want, I'll give you all we have. Only please take it and go."

He kept the gun leveled as he moved into the living room and looked around cautiously. "You alone here?" he demanded. She nodded. He advanced, glanced at her sewing, snatched the scissors from the machine, and flung them across the room. She started to protest as they landed on the coffee table and gouged a long scratch in the wood, but stifled her cry of indignation. It's only a table. He stalked to the window. Cautiously he peered through the curtains, making sure of the yard. Until that moment she hadn't thought of Billy; now she was terrified that he might be in sight, might be wandering toward the house. With his childish bravery and his mind full of the plots and schemes of his stories, he'd try something foolish and this man wouldn't hesitate to kill him. Please God, please, she prayed, keep him outside—away from the house.

The intruder had turned from the window and she sat staring into space, caught in the nightmare of Billy rushing at the man with the gun.

His voice cut in on her thoughts. "You expecting anybody?"

"No."

"Where's your husband?"

"He's away helping some neighbors."

He was beside her instantly, jerking her to her feet. "You're lying!" he snarled.

I mustn't fight, she thought. Face him quietly. Easy! His fingers dug into her arm and she winced, but she didn't pull away.

"You're lying," he grated again. "He's around here somewhere."

"He's not, I tell you."

"Then what's that car doing outside?"

"He took the truck."

He searched her face looking for the lie, then slowly his fingers loosened and he released her. She backed away, hunting for the right words to penetrate his armor of suspicion. "Look," she began, "can we have some kind of understanding? I'm trying to cooperate with you because it's the only thing to do. I'm not going to try any heroics, but I want you out of my home. Please take whatever you want and go."

"You're quite a dame, ain't you? Scared stiff and cool as a cucumber. You're just the kind who would try something."

"No. No, I wouldn't. I'm trying to be smart and the only smart thing to do is to help you."

"It ain't as simple as wanting to raid your little teapot of egg money," he said sarcastically. "I'm hungry and I'm tired. I'm on the run and I ain't gettin' caught. There's three stiff behind me and you could be the fourth. It's up to you."

"I'll fix you some food. Then will you leave?"

"I'll leave when I'm ready," he growled. "But right now I want something to eat. Something quick like bacon and eggs. Move!"

She did as she was told, moving numbly ahead of him. She still had the sunbonnet in her hand and she laid it on the kitchen table as she turned to the refrigerator for the eggs and bacon.

"What's that thing?" he asked, motioning with the gun.

"It's part of a costume for the community play."

"Big deal!" he sneered. "You little mousy people with your little hobbies. Shakes you up to see how the other half lives, doesn't it?"

She put the bacon in the pan, afraid to say anything else. Her mind went to Billy and the hunger that would turn his footsteps back soon. Already the sun was beginning to set. Behind her the door slammed and she jumped and turned. The man had kicked it shut with his foot and now he sat down at the table and watched her. The gun lay on the table and his hand hovered beside it. He was looking her over, his free hand rubbing the stubble of his beard.

"You ain't a bad looker," he said, "but there's something with you I don't like. Your mind's spinning like a top, ain't it, looking for a way to turn me in?"

"I'm not interested in turning you in—only in your leaving."

"What's the hurry?" He was silent for a few minutes, polishing the barrel of the gun with his finger. Finally he said, "I know what's wrong with this place. Couldn't put my finger on it. No kids. Ain't you got kids?"

Panic swept her and she said "No" almost too quickly.

"Good thing," he said. "Anything puts me on edge, it's kids."

Like a merry-go-round, Billy's name went through her mind, *Billy, Billy, Billy*. Her hands moved efficiently, but her mind was back on its frantic race. He'd be getting hungry. He'd be coming home any minute. She looked at the clock—four-fifteen; the sun almost gone and darkness hovering like a bird, ready to swoop down. She always told him to be in before dark, unless he was helping his father with the chores. If she could make up an excuse to go to the barn she could circle behind it and find him. They could cut across the fields to Muriel's and get her husband,

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Earl. He was the sheriff. He was probably looking for the man now. Maybe he'd come by and ask if she'd seen him—and the man at the table would kill him. She snapped on the light above the stove. If he did come by, if he happened to look in, he could see the big man at the table and the gun beside him. At least he'd have a chance.

"What are you thinking about?" His voice jerked her back.

"I should go feed the stock."

"Fat chance!" he sneered. "Trick number one, huh?"

"No." She put the coffee on and turned her attention back to the bacon. Oh God, dear God, make him leave! She tried to hurry the bacon that was sizzling in the pan. It began to smoke and he said, "I want it cooked, not burned." She turned the flame down a little and got out the silverware. As she put it in front of him, she hesitated beside the gun. His fingers closed around it and he smiled wryly and moved it to one side, keeping his hand on it. The bacon was ready at last and she broke the eggs into the pan and put bread in the toaster. The sounds of the eggs frying, the perk of the coffee, and the tick of the clock became a weird off-key symphony to her ears. The heartbeat of the house, as she had called it before, became something ominous and mocking now. It turned itself into Billy's footsteps. It reminded her that each tick brought him closer to danger. The house that had been a haven, that had held the world away and filled itself with love and happiness, was now a trap, a place of dread, a friend turned traitor.

The man behind her swore and said, "I'm hungry! Will you hurry up!"

She put the eggs beside the bacon and turned to butter the toast. He swung up from the table to look out the window and she held her breath. She didn't dare look herself; she only watched the expression of the angular face, looking for the squint of the eyes that would follow if he saw Billy. There was no change. He turned away and sat down at the table. He began to wolf the food down and demand coffee. She brought the toast and the steaming coffeepot. For a rash moment she considered throwing the scalding liquid in his face and running for the door, but he seemed to read her mind. He stared at her as she poured. She took another cup and poured one for herself, glancing out the window above the sink as she did it. No small figure coming from the woods. Thank God. Hurry, mister, hurry. Eat and take your gun and go! She couldn't stay by the window. It would remind him to look out now and then. She turned away and sat across the table from him and watched him eat.



Except for the sound of the clock and the scrape of his fork against his plate, it was as quiet as it had been before he came. She sipped her coffee without tasting it, and then because she was too nervous to just sit still, she picked up the sunbonnet and began to finish the last stitches.

The harsh ring of the phone was so unexpected it brought the man to his feet in one wild movement. His fork clanked against the plate and his gun was in his hand. She had the idea he was going to start pulling the trigger, and once started he'd never stop. Her voice was shrill as she almost shrieked, "It's only the phone!"

"Sit still! Don't answer it!"

It rang again, grating against their nerves. She could hardly keep her hand from reaching for it. "It's my ring," she said. "It's probably one of my neighbors."

"No!"

"If I don't answer, someone might come over to find out if I'm all right. They know I'm always home." He looked at her warily and she added lamely, "It's the way people are in the country."

It rang twice more and as if he himself couldn't stand it any longer, he said grimly, "Answer it, but watch what you say! Don't try anything, and make it short." He moved to the phone beside her and she felt the gun hard against her back.

She lifted the receiver and, trying to keep her voice normal, said, "Hello?"

Muriel's cheerful voice came through loud and clear. "Marsha, I've been trying to get you, but the line's been all tied up with everyone gabbing about the excitement. Has anybody else called you?"

"No. Why?"

"Oh, it's so exciting! There's an escaped convict running around loose. He killed three guards getting away and heaven knows what he was in for in the first place. With Bob gone, I thought you ought to know to keep your doors locked. They think he's hiding out in the woods around here."

She went on to describe him, and her voice, so near, so familiar, made Marsha think insanely of crying out her predicament, but the gun prodded the idea away. All she could say was, "How awful."

"Yes, well, of course you can imagine how impossible my husband is to live with. He's full of superiority and commands. Reminds me of a little boy playing cops and robbers."

WHO'S THERE?

31

"Yes, well—"

"Of course, with this fellow, this Eddie Hartland, running around, everyone's keeping their kids in and I thought—"

No! Don't mention Billy! "Everything's fine over here," she interrupted. Her eyes went to the face of the man beside her and he nodded in approval and motioned for her to cut the conversation off. "Thanks for calling," she said. "I've got to hang up. I have a cake due to come out of the oven."

"Well, I just wanted you to know. At least it's something to brighten up our drab little lives, huh? I'll let you go."

"Thanks again. Bye." She hung up, sick with frustration, knowing her only chance was gone. She hadn't got one word through because she hadn't dared to let Muriel rattle on and mention Billy's name. She wanted terribly to cry, but she could only look at the man and say stupidly, "So that's your name, Eddie Hartland."

"Yeah, that's it." He sat down at the table again and said, "More coffee."

She poured it with trembling hands. He lighted a cigarette as if he had a whole lifetime to spend at the table and she thought, I'll scream if he sits here one more minute!

"You'd better go," she said with as little feeling as possible. "They'll be looking here soon."

"Shut up. I gotta think. And don't play like you're interested in my welfare."

"I'm not! I'm not!" she said fiercely, feeling her control slip away. "I don't care about you one way or the other. I only want you to go. I can't stand much more of this. Just get out!"

She watched his face as she blazed her anger at him and she didn't care whether it angered him or not. "I'll give you money," she went on. "I'll give you the keys to the car. I'll give you anything you want, only get out of here!"

Then she heard it—the faint sound of a whistle. A wave of sickness swept her and she began to talk incoherently, trying to keep the sound from reaching his ears.

"You're a fool to stay here, can't you see that?" she babbled. "With the car you'd have a chance to get away. Why don't you take the car, go out the back road? They'll never catch you." She snatched her cup and went to the counter, pretending to pour more coffee for herself while her voice kept up a steady stream. Still talking, she glanced out the window. She

saw Billy happily kicking at the dirt with each step that brought him closer to the house. He looked pathetically small and frail to her and it seemed she had never loved him before as she did at that moment.

"Slow down!" he ordered. He started to say something more and stopped. Even with her back to him, she knew how he stiffened as he heard the whistle. "What's that?" he demanded. She tried to block his view, but he was already behind her. His voice was a snarl. "Who's he?"

In desperation she pushed him aside and said, "Don't let him see you."

"What's he coming here for? Who is he?"

She didn't know where the words came from. "It's just a pesky neighbor kid." She waved him back as he peered through the window, and pleaded, "Let me run him off. If he sees you, he'll be bound to tell it at home and they'll send the police." He frowned, and she pushed on, "I'm always chasing him away. He's used to it. It will be better this way."

He weighed her idea, then growled, "O.K., but you better be careful what you say!"

She opened the door, wondering frantically what to say, how to make Billy understand and obey her. "Billy Smith!" she yelled. "Get out of my yard!" He stopped and stared at her. A look of bewilderment crossed his face and she saw his lips start to form the word she most dreaded to hear—"mom." Before he could say it, she screamed angrily, "Not one word of back talk, young man! I'm sick of you cutting across our land. You do as I say. Get out of here!"

He looked at her in a hurt way she had never seen, and for a moment she thought he'd cry. Her mind screamed her thoughts. Billy, Billy, listen to me. Understand! Something new replaced his look, but there was still disbelief there. In an unsure voice he said, "Are you kidding—"

Again she cut off the word. "Don't you say another word or I'll tell your mom how sassy you are." She opened the screen and said, "You get!" With a shooing motion, she waved her hand and realized she was holding the sunbonnet. For the life of her she couldn't remember having picked it up, but as she looked at it she thought of the play. It was a chance in a thousand, but she threw it at him and said crossly, "And give this to Pearl. She can finish it herself." She closed the screen and on a last impulse she called, "And tell Carolyn not to worry about hers." She saw Billy's look of confusion as he stooped and picked up the bonnet. He looked at it and then at her. She yelled, "Go on!", slammed the door, and leaned against it, trembling and praying as she had never prayed.

WHO'S THERE?

33

Eddie's eyes were measuring her and his voice was cold with suspicion. "That was kind of a long speech, wasn't it?"

"He's a stupid kid," she said.

"See if he's gone," he commanded.

She looked out. He still stood there, looking strangely forlorn, staring like someone in a dream at the door that had been slammed. She saw him finger the sunbonnet uncertainly, then turn and slowly walk away. He stopped once and looked back, then started off toward Muriel Smith's farm. In the growing dusk he walked faster and finally he ran.

Marsha leaned against the cabinet and wept. The fear she had held back for so long swept over her full force. Her fight for Billy was over. He was safe and nothing else mattered. She wasn't afraid of Eddie Hartland now. She didn't have to live in terror of each minute. While the tears streamed, bringing relief from the tension, a new thought struggled up. Bob! Was there no end! He could come home any minute too. If he came in, she'd fling herself into his arms. The bullet must pass her body first, for she knew with a certainty the man would shoot. Their days, their nights together swept before her mind: the way his arm went around her waist, the way he tipped her head to kiss her, his closeness, his warmth, the way one's heart read the other's. Was he even now sensing her peril, making excuses to get home?

"That's enough. Stop it!"

She opened her eyes and felt an insane laughter bubbling up to mingle with the tears.

"I can't stop," she gasped. "I'm going to cry forever."

The blow from his hand jerked her head to one side and she didn't know whether his voice was the sharp little slivers of pain in her mind or the slashes of light before her eyes.

"Stop the hysterics!"

His slap stopped the laughter, but the tears continued while she wished she could faint, wished the nightmare would end.

"What about that road?" he asked. "That one you were talking about?"

Reaching deep for control she thought was gone, she managed to check the tears, but there was nothing she could do about the sobs that continued to shake her. Her mind was giving orders again. He's going to go. Just a little longer! Do everything you can to help him. Hurry!

"I'll get the keys." Her voice was too frantic.

"Wait a minute. Where's that road go?"

She explained, but he wanted details. Painfully, she told him each one. "There's a bridge—another road. Hardly ever used—goes west across the state—"

"How much gas is in the car?"

"Nearly a full tank."

"I'll need some food."

She stared numbly at him.

"Fix something to take, some sandwiches and some of that cake."

Another eternity while her fingers fumbled with waxed paper and the sandwiches fell apart.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded sharply, and she could only mumble, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Finally she had it ready. He wanted a flashlight. She hunted in the drawer for it. (It must be upstairs.) She started up the steps, and he yelled, "That money you were talking about, get it."

She found the flashlight and brought her purse. He watched her while she hunted through her bag for the keys and her wallet. She gave him the keys, and he shoved them into his pocket. The gun was on the table out of his reach, but it was out of her reach too; and, besides, it didn't matter now. He was leaving. She took the money out of her wallet and gave it to him. In a minute it would all be over.

He took the money and started to leave. "One more thing," he said, turning around. "I need some other clothes. Your husband got a jacket?"

Maddened by this new delay, she yanked open the closet door, seized her husband's red-and-black hunting jacket, and thrust it at him.

"Not that—those colors would show up a mile away. Here—lemme look." He shoved her aside and stared into the closet.

Paralyzed, she looked over his shoulder. There, all lined up like an exhibit, were Billy's catcher's mitt and his baseball cap, his small fishing rod, his painter's overalls, like miniatures hanging next to his father's, and, worst of all, the school windbreaker he was so proud of because it had his name on the front. BILLY, it said in large white letters.

"You lied!" Eddie Hartland screamed. "You do have kids!" Shrewd understanding mingled with his insane anger. "That kid—he was yours! You sent him after somebody!"

His curses filled the kitchen as he grabbed her. His hands were at her throat, and the sound of his fury was in her ears. She fought him with all the strength she had, but she knew it was useless. She thought of

Billy's tears when they found her. She thought of Bob, how she loved him, and that she'd never know his kisses again. She threw a last look of hatred at the man whose face was blurring before her eyes. She couldn't understand what she was seeing—an arm above his head, the flash of a gun through the air, the sound of its hitting his head, and he was sprawling at her feet.

Earl's face replaced Eddie Hartland's, his arm steadied her as he guided her to a chair and eased her into it. His voice sounded far away as he said, "Good thing he was yelling so he didn't hear me come in."

She wanted to slide out of the chair, just slip to the floor and let the sickening blackness have her, but there was a rush past Earl, and Billy's arms were flinging themselves around her. He was on his knees hugging her, and her arms automatically cradled him against her, but she could only stare at the unconscious figure on the floor until the weakness passed. Earl was putting handcuffs on the limp wrists when Bob came in.

Bob stared in astonishment at the scene in his kitchen. Too weak to talk, Marsha listened to Earl explain the situation to her husband. When Earl got to Billy's part in the episode, Billy stirred in his mother's arms. He lifted his head and looked up at her, his eyes shining.

"You were keen, Mom! You did have me mixed up at first, but, gee, that sunbonnet!" He hugged her again with a fierceness that knocked the breath from both of them. "That stumped me until I remembered the play when they find your hat and know you're in trouble. Then when you said to tell Carolyn not to worry, I was sure. I figured that Pearl was code talk for Earl, and I knew just what I had to do."

For a moment she felt almost angry, realizing that to Billy her long, terrible ordeal was little more than a real-life mystery story. Then, while his excitement still allowed him to accept such a caress without embarrassment, she drew him close again. "You did just fine, Billy," she told him. "Just fine."

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*Money troubles strike people at all income levels . . .*

# THE WILD GREEN YONDER

PLESHER FLIGHT SERVICE

by  
GARY  
ALEXANDER



Buddy Whitacre felt the same queasy gut-tightening he had often experienced in Vietnam when he flew Army L-19 observation planes, cruising low over the terrain, part voyeur, part bull's-eye. Was it the threat of impending death, or just general malaise and a feeling of futility? Anyway, this was another moment when he would have preferred to be elsewhere.

His student had just cajoled, lurched, and weaved her airplane into



the landing pattern, with but one more left turn to make before facing her dreaded enemy, the landing strip.

"Mrs. Spangler!" Whitacre shouted over the engine and airstream noise, and the strident squawk of the landing-gear warning buzzer, which activated whenever the plane fell below a certain airspeed with its wheels still up. "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"What? I can't hear over all this racket."

"Haven't you overlooked something vital to our landing, Mrs. Spangler?" Buddy yelled back.

Mrs. Spangler's husband owned the airplane and used it in his business. She had signed on for lessons in case—as Mr. Spangler put it—the old ticker gave out on him and she had to get the damn thing back down on the ground. Whitacre suspected that Mrs. Spangler had pushed it, hoping to reverse a mid-life marital erosion, but that was none of his business. His only concern was the \$12.00 an hour he made as instructor when Plesher Flight Service's regular staff couldn't keep up with the work load.

Mrs. Spangler realized her omission, released the yoke, and cupped her chin. "Oh, dear!"

For an instant the plane was without a pilot. The nose dropped and Buddy saw more green than blue. With a subtle fingertip he lifted back on the yoke, correcting the aircraft's attitude. One didn't overtly take over unless it was critical; that was bad for the student pilot's confidence.

Mrs. Spangler flicked the landing-gear lever. The wheels came down and locked with an electrical purr. "It's so complicated," she said. "There are so many things to remember."

"It'll soon become instinctive to you," Whitacre lied.

Mrs. Spangler made her final turn, more or less lined up with the runway, but a good fifteen knots too fast, a hundred feet too high.

"Flying is really easy," she commented, "if it wasn't for getting up and down from the field."

Whitacre nodded, his palms flat on his knees. His slacks absorbed most of the perspiration. If you panicked, he knew, so would they. And the word would pass. Twelve bucks an hour right out the window.

They soared over the end of the runway. Mrs. Spangler said, "The field looks smaller than it did last time."

"No problem," Buddy said breezily, poised and ready to jam the throttle to the cowl and go around again. "We have ten thousand feet. No need to make a postage-stamp landing, Mrs. Spangler."

Mrs. Spangler jerked back and forth on the yoke, consistently over-correcting. The ship ballooned and floated past the halfway point hash-mark. It finally settled in with a squeal, a thud, another squeal, another thud. Buddy pedalled his toe brakes. The plane vibrated and shuddered, coming at last to a halt three hundred feet from the far boundary. Mrs. Spangler grasped the throttle knob. "Shall we practice one more landing? Go around and shoot a touch-and-go?" She beamed at him. "I just love aviation terminology."

Whitacre took her hand firmly but gently and pointed to the towering conifers just beyond. "If we did that from here, Mrs. Spangler, we might be exceeding the short-field capabilities of the aircraft. And it's the wrong season to make Christmas wreaths of ourselves."

Mrs. Spangler giggled.

They taxied to the Plesher Flight Service apron. Buddy opened a window vent and the cooling, evaporating quality of the air did its job. A pro didn't step out of an airplane in the company of other pros drenched with sweat.

Whitacre signed Mrs. Spangler's log book, reluctantly set up an appointment for another lesson, then went into Rollo Plesher's office. Plesher had flown bush in Alaska and with the Eighth Air Force over Europe. He was all leather and apocrypha, and had forgotten more about flying than Buddy knew he would ever learn. He just wished Rollo had a full-time opening.

"Anything else scheduled today, Rollo?"

"Kevin Birdwell cancelled out. That's it, Buddy. Sorry."

Whitacre himself wasn't entirely sorry, much as he needed the money. Birdwell was a young stockbroker who had just lost his girl friend to a disco champion. He had only taken up flying to dazzle her and always seemed bored by the basic academics of flying. Buddy suspected he spent much of his air time scouting out bridges to fly under or hangars to buzz through.

"Smithson is taking a month off in July," Rollo added. "You're my first choice to replace him."

"I may be all skin and bones by then," Buddy replied. When he was discharged from the Army, the vast numbers of Vietnam veterans already in the civilian flying market had been a rude surprise. He'd been in the tail end of the war, a victim of the supply-and-demand curve.

He had faced the alternatives of a shoestring flying career or a different line of work with a more promising future, and had made the only conceivable choice. It had killed his marriage and he lived in a mobile home that had been manufactured when they all had wheels.

"Wait a minute," Rollo said, snapping his fingers. "Leon Caskins called. He wants you for an hour at four o'clock."

"Why me?" Buddy asked. Leon Caskins owned the most expensive single-engine airplane on the field. As owner of Caskins Contractors, Inc., he used it to visit his widely flung projects. An experienced pilot, Caskins took his infrequent check-rides with Rollo Plesher himself.

Rollo shrugged. "An idea he has. He figures a fresh instructor might pick out bad habits before I would. Leon and I have been flying together for years. You might notice something before I do. It makes sense, I guess—and, between us, I never much cared for him anyway."

Neither did Buddy. Caskins was a loud, overbearing braggart—but that airplane of his! It was a freshly minted hundred-thousand-dollar completely instrumented six-passenger piece of sheer luxury!

Four o'clock arrived slowly, but Caskins was right on time. He was chunky, balding, all too obviously self-made, and chewed continually on an unlit cigar.

As they settled into Caskins' plane, Buddy leaned back and enjoyed the aroma of new leather. Whatever Caskins had in mind, it would be refreshingly different from a session with Kevin Birdwell or Mrs. Spangler. It was a glorious day, with ceiling and visibility virtually unlimited. Caskins set a heading toward the mountains. Perhaps he just wanted some companionship for a bit of sightseeing.

Caskins leveled out at nine thousand and throttled back to economy cruise. "Rollo thinks a lot of you," he commented. "He wishes he had the business to keep you on permanently. It must be kind of tough to make ends meet."

"I'm doing fine," Buddy lied. "I do some instruction and charter on the side with my own plane." (Buddy's pre-war Piper Cub was hardly anyone's first choice for anything. It was slow, drafty, and capable of vibrating loose the work of the most competent dentist.)

"I was sorry to hear about your divorce," Caskins went on.

Strange. What did Leon Caskins care? "Well, I don't blame Sandy. She needed a man with his nose a little closer to the grindstone, not

someone with romantic notions about flying. She said I was born fifty years too late."

Caskins laughed. "Goggles and scarf, barnstorming the Midwest in a biplane?" Buddy laughed but didn't answer. "You know, Buddy, money troubles strike people at all income levels."

"Sure."

"Like all this recession talk. This one project I was counting on in Montana was scrubbed even before they opened the bids. Then I blew this later one locally. Trying to compensate, I overbid."

"That happens," Buddy said, distracted by the adjacent mountain range—a rainbow row of raspberry sundaes.

Caskins shut off his radio gear. "You take this airplane. When it gets tough, it can be a real albatross. The tax writeoff is not as great as you might imagine, and with present interest rates the payments would choke a mule. Cash flow is the thing, see. A few thousand bucks you don't have right now can cripple a big business, believe it or not."

"I can believe that."

"What I'm leading up to, Buddy, is that I'm giving up primary usage of this baby to a partner. I get to ride it once in a while but it's mostly his, along with the contract on it. I'd like you to ferry it down to him." Caskins described an isolated grass strip two hundred miles away. He needed the job done as soon as possible.

"I guess you know I have a pretty clear calendar," Whitacre said.

"One thing, though," Caskins told him. "It has to be hush-hush. You know how airport gossip is around the coffeepot on a rainy day. More than one pilot who hangs around here would get all sorts of pleasure if they knew Leon Caskins was on the ropes."

Buddy didn't doubt that, but he didn't respond.

"What I'd like you to do is get out of here before dawn tomorrow. I've cleared it with Rollo. As far as anybody has to know, my superintendent in Oregon came up for it because he needs it worse than me. Multimillion-dollar job down there and whatnot."

"Sounds reasonable."

"Five hundred dollars plus expenses. Will that handle it?"

For a day's work—plus the bus ride home? "What's the catch?"

Caskins presented a nervous grin. "No catch, kid, just what I said. Get out ahead of the chickens. No flight plan either. I'm just protecting the Leon Caskins image. It's worth that much to me."

Buddy hesitated. It wouldn't be the first time for such a stunt. Collect from your insurance company on the theft coverage and double-dip by either having the plane flown out of the country by a confederate or having it dismantled and shipped piecemeal overseas to an affluent buyer looking for a discount.

Five hundred plus mileage, yet Buddy Whitacre had not heard a single word alluding to a crime. "It's a deal, Mr. Caskins," he said, "but I want a letter from you covering this conversation. Just in case, you know, a question is raised about me being out in the countryside with your airplane and no flight plan filed."

Caskins gave him another grim, panoramic and yellow-toothed. "No sweat, kid. I wouldn't want anybody flying this beaut unless he was naturally cautious. It'll be waiting for you in the map case when you start out in the morning."

He reduced power, turned the radio equipment back on, and banked toward the airport. "Now let me see if I can get this thing onto a slab of concrete before we miss cocktail hour."

Prior to sunrise, Buddy Whitacre drove to the deserted airport, climbed a chainlink fence, and preflighted Caskins' ship. In the map case he found five crisp portraits of Benjamin Franklin and two more to cover the promised expense compensation. But no letter, no note.

Decision time. In the air, quick decisions were constantly demanded. Now, on the ramp, he had one more to make before the sun came up. He didn't especially like Caskins and trusted him less. He knew his own well being was far down on the list of Caskins' priorities. On the other hand, nothing illegal had been discussed. Buddy was a commercial pilot performing a service. His car needed a valve job, and three well balanced meals a day for a while was not an unpleasant prospect.

Caskins was a busy man, Buddy rationalized as he broke ground. Possibly the authorization letter had slipped his mind. And Buddy loved flying in the crisp, moist air of a mid-spring morning. It was like sliding on a sheet of glass. His suspicions lingered though, so instead of climbing to the desired seven thousand feet straight out he took his altitude by circling over the field. If Caskins had been setting him up, he could observe the arrival of police cars. But his home base remained serene and unoccupied.

He steered south, attempting to deal with the one final fly in the

ointment, Caskins' insistence that he not file a flight plan with the FAA. If a student of his had embarked on a cross-country flight without doing that, Whitacre would have chewed him or her into confetti. If you went down, precious time would be lost before the authorities knew you were in the air at all, let alone overdue at a particular destination.

Then he thought of Ben Franklin's visage. Seven Ben Franklins lined up in military precision, awaiting service at a teller's window. What the hell.

Twenty miles out the tachometer lost one hundred rpm's without Buddy once touching the throttle. Carburetor ice, he diagnosed. It was a quirky thing, peculiar to the internal aerodynamics of aircraft carburetors. Even in warm weather, ice would build up in the fuel passageways. He liked to make an atherosclerosis analogy to his students, comparing carburetor ice to the clogging of a coronary artery the size of a noodle. Close off the blood flow to the heart and it was all over. Same on an airplane. Choke off your gasoline supply and you had a glider on your hands.

He pulled on the carburetor heat lever. No reaction. Off, then on once more. Zilch. The engine noise remained constant. There was no fluctuation on the engine instruments. The engine started to run rough, gradually losing more revolutions.

Buddy yanked hard on the carburetor heat knob. The knob and connecting rod came out six inches. Not at all normal. Power slumped below what was necessary to maintain level flight.

Caskins, you bastard! No, you didn't cut the cable; that might get you tripped up by the accident investigators, who were geniuses at performing mechanical autopsies. What you probably did was loosen a screw or two and unravel some safety wire. Metal fatigue, excess vibration. So sorry about Whitacre—a nice lad. Desperate for money, apparently, but quite personable.

Buddy applied full power. It made no difference. He took it back to idle and turned the magnetos off and on, hoping for a backfire that would break loose and blow out the mini-glacier. No luck.

Good thinking, Caskins. There was no delay in an insurance payoff when the loss was a crash—an untidy sprinkling of aluminum slag—whereas they might hold out if your plane merely vanished. And if you, your company-pilots, and everyone involved with Plesher Flight Service were named on a life-insurance policy with you as a beneficiary—just in

case—who would be suspicious? And if there was no heir save an ex-wife to prosecute in the case of one impoverished, flaky, obviously desperate Buddy Whitacre, how less messy the entire situation would be!

The engine quit altogether. Buddy remembered a cliché about deafening silence, but didn't dwell on it. He swung the ship back in the direction of the airport and trimmed it at the optimum glide speed of eighty knots. His rate-of-climb indicator, which also registered rate of descent, reminded him that he was losing fifteen hundred feet a minute. Compared to his Piper Cub, this thing glided like a brick.

It was Buddy's first forced landing since Vietnam, when a sniper, luckier than he could have imagined, severed an oil line and cooked the engine. He had brought it down in a rubber plantation and hiked four perilous miles to safety.

He saw there was no chance to make the airport and there was nothing directly in between but trees, but the southern suburbs of town were off to the left, and reachable. It was a new area of industrial parks, factories, and partially completed construction. If he set down on freshly excavated gumbo he might flip over but he should be able to walk away from it.

His altimeter registered two thousand feet—ninety seconds of air time left, tops. He passed over the freeway, briefly considering it as an alternative. No way. It was already filled with early-morning commuters, a tight necklace of headlights. Even if he found the space to land, those stunned, bleary-eyed motorists would be a hazard. His fragile aluminum cockpit was no match for a Buick.

No noise could be heard except the windsong. It was eerie. He set course for a complex he recognized. It wasn't far from his trailer park, and he had a pretty good idea of the layout—wide straight-across roads and underground wiring. He had no wish to be almost safely down, then garroted by an electrical line.

Talk to yourself, Buddy—instructor to student. Stretch your glide but don't force it. Lose too much airspeed and you'll stall, nosing in like a duck that's been wasted by a twelve-gauge shotgun.

Tops of trees spared by the developers as token landscaping were above him, but that was no sweat. He realized now exactly where he was. The next street would be a cinch, but he held out for the one beyond—one that was familiar. He skimmed over a two-story building, missing a gutter by the thickness of a film of dew.



Dead ahead after a precarious ninety-degree turn was his landing trip—five hundred feet of asphalt. It could have been two miles of concrete at JFK; he didn't give a damn, he knew he could handle it.

Buddy lowered his gear and slammed onto the surface with no finesse whatsoever, forgiving Mrs. Spangler for all her past sins. He stood on the brakes until they smoked, wearing beyond serviceability one side of Leon Caskins' new tires. He skidded, kissing a curbing, then straightened out. The only moving car in his path, a red Datsun, bounded out of the lane onto the lawn of a pharmaceutical wholesaler. Made in the shade, Buddy Whitacre.

The ship slowed to a walk. He had room to spare. The end of the street was his objective, so he eased up on the brakes and coasted to a halt.

Buddy Whitacre uncinched his seat belt, leaned back to relax, and waited visitors. The random curious would flock in for sure. The FAA would, but that would come later. TV news teams also, most likely.

A siren grew louder. The state police, he presumed. They were known to get antsy about such things. He'd have a few questions to answer, but not about Leon Caskins. He examined the carburetor heat rod and cable in detail. It had been severed with nippers. Evidently Leon, in his enthusiasm, had taken a shortcut, certain that there wouldn't be enough effort of the plane or pilot to discern sabotage. And the Ben Franklin engravings, so crisp and new; Buddy handled them gingerly lest wet ink stain his hands. Consecutive serial numbers too. It shouldn't be hard to pinpoint their origin. Yes, he would have to answer some questions, but not the ones that would be posed to Leon Caskins would be a good deal more difficult.

The State Police cruiser slid to a stop in front of the airplane. Buddy was happy, ready for some company to discuss his experience with. He only wished that the president of the company housed in the concrete building thirty feet to his right was waiting too. It would make for a lively, stimulating conversation. A neon sign over its entrance identified it as Caskins Contractors, Inc.



*Some clouds in a spy's life have a silver lining . . .*

# KILLING MARTIN STOVER by JEFFRY SCOTT



**M**y raincoat would never be the same again. Beryl had bought it in a forlorn attempt to give the old man a touch of style. It was a silky, light colored thing, almost iridescent under certain lights, rather well cut but decidedly embarrassing to wear.

Now the man calling himself James Ewart Parnell, import-export agent was dying all over it. Every cloud has a silver lining.

Parnell was an agent all right, but he imported very little except well

laundered money from his masters, and exported secrets in return. His real name was something jaw-cracking that hinted at a birthplace well the far side of the Elbe, but he looked English enough. Actually, he'd been born in Scotland—or rather somebody had, and Parnell II had taken over that person's identity. Parnell II had served in the British Army, because we happened to have his fingerprints from that period. So he had been in place for a long while.

Big Ben's voice wavered across the Thames, sounding very far away with the wind against it. Stand up, though, and you could just make out a light near the clock tower, showing that the House of Commons was in session. I couldn't stand up. My leg had gone to sleep because Parnell was dying all over that as well. His blood kept me fairly warm below the waist.

I hated the bastard.

He spat out a bit of tooth and the one remaining good eye opened a slit. "What happened? Why are you here?"

"You tried to drive through a heavy truck, squire. It didn't work. As for me being around to watch it—that was pure luck. I'll send up a little prayer of gratitude when I get home."

Parnell didn't seem to understand. His head rolled on my tensed thigh and I held him a bit tighter. He managed to get rid of another tooth fragment and a big bubble of blood formed on his broken mouth, then vanished as he spoke again.

"I didn't see you before—whatever happened to me."

I tried to remember the classic Sherlock Holmes riposte about nothing being what you were expected to see when shadowed by an expert. It wouldn't come out right, so I kept my trap shut. The truth was that I'd been tailing him for all of a quarter mile before the crash.

And that had been no more than reflex action on spotting him. Parnell had been too full of himself for weeks. Nothing blatant—he wasn't the sort. Just what the French call a *frisson* of smugness, a spring in his normally trudging step, a glint in the eye that I didn't like a bit.

He was supposed to be a minor figure, you see. His books included a few Ministry clerks, a secretary, the mistress of a defense consultant—she needed cocaine more than she needed self-respect or prudence—and an R.A.F. warrant officer with a trick of taking equipment-maintenance manuals home on weekends. We knew them all—some were our people. Parnell didn't have a radio. His material went off on a microdot, taking

weeks to reach that bland-faced office building at 28 Glorious Soviet Navy Avenue in Moscow.

But an occupational risk of my trade—and there's no way of wrapping this up pompously—is never knowing quite where you are. You learn to assume that first the opposition, then your colleagues, cannot be what they seem.

The disease had gone considerably further with me, which was why I wanted to retire, and the sooner the better. I was hagridden by the conviction that too many faces weren't what they *didn't* seem to be either. Parnell, for instance, could be a very high-octane character indeed, a Grand Chef, fooling us all by acting like a minnow.

Whether giant or pygmy, he was leaving the world exactly as he'd moved around it—with a lie on his lips. He'd seen me, all right. He'd been so intent on that oversized anti-dazzle rearview mirror that he had sailed straight out into the main road and under a lorry.

What could be seen of his face had started smoothing out as he slid toward the long drop. "Where am I?" he asked drowsily, before rambling away in another language. My spoken Russian, poor at the best of times and quite rusty these days, was useless.

I shook him a bit, like a fond parent joggling a baby, and Parnell moaned, one eye opening wide. It wasn't registering anything and already the pupil seemed filmy.

"Where am I?" he repeated.

"Mr. Parnell, I'm Dr. Rudge. You must rest quietly. You've been in intensive care for five days, but you're on the mend."

"Five days—then I've done it. We've got Martin Stover."

The ambulance men were shocked to see me drop Parnell's head onto the tarmac with a thump as they raced toward us with the stretcher. I didn't bother to explain that he had been dead for at least a minute by then. It had taken me that long to come to terms with those parting four words.

"Martin Stover; of all people," Sir Edgar mourned. The four clocks above his head, showing times around the world, gave a spastic twitch of their minute hands in sympathy.

I knew what he meant. Stover had been arrogant, wild, drunken, and his sexual preferences had bulged over a number of frontiers, but he was also brilliant.

With Martin, however, brilliance came and went according to the weather or the success of his emotional life. He'd been rescreened, and the screenings had been rechecked countless times since the Burgess, Maclean, and Kim Philby disasters. In a totally illogical, completely convincing fashion, Martin's personal messiness and vulnerability had been reassuring. Anybody so like those other traitors *couldn't* be the same.

Joke.

Now we were holding a combination of wake and council of war. I kept wondering what, if I ever got home again, Beryl would make of the news that the lovely raincoat was lying in a garbage bin near Waterloo Station.

Pete Essen cleared his throat and looked at his watch, then at the clocks. Bald and beaky, he reminded me of a hen anxiously pecking for grain. He was frantic to leave, and for good reason. It might be too late, but he had to alert his networks—Red and Green, a total of about twenty-five men and women. Essen wasn't an imaginative man; he'd been using color labels since 1951.

Sir Edgar grunted and jerked his chin sideways. Poor Pete literally ran across the room and out through the triple doors, cursing under his breath when the combination lock on the inner one defied his sweaty fingers. Tragic, because in Iron Curtain countries you can't just swan off to the South of France for two weeks' vacation. You start running eighteen months before your absence becomes imperative. Essen would be telling his merry men—or, rather, persons—that they might have twenty-four hours if God was in a good mood. I judged that he might rescue one agent, who happened to be in Turkey as part of a cultural mission.

Gerald Fernie opened his eyes. He looked a bit like a frog, pallid and somehow clammy, skin very pale, but the odd thing was that he was quite an attractive fellow. His hair was black and absurdly glossy, giving an impression of youth, though he had to be pushing fifty. Fernie was Sir Edgar's protégé and I'd never been able to decide where he fitted in. He'd been a don at one of the red-brick universities one has never heard of, and sometimes he popped up on TV arts programs.

"It may not be as bad as we think. Simply a hideous mess, that is to say; an obscene mishap, but not the end of the world." His voice was melodious and overproduced, putting invisible quotation marks around phrases or underscoring them so that one could never be sure when he was serious.

He looked at me. "Bill, we know that Martin Stover came into pos-

session of the networks information only ten days ago, when he was promoted."

Sir Edgar flushed and looked as if he wanted to cut his own throat, but Fernie ignored the slight stir at the other end of the long table. "You seem to believe that the agent Parnell was involved with Martin. Would Parnell have acted as Martin's communications channel?"

I shook my head. "Martin never trusted Parnell. He thought Parnell was doubling, working for the Chinese as well. Parnell must have negotiated for Martin, but Martin wouldn't have allowed him to handle any material."

Fernie glanced around the table. "Agreed, gentlemen?" I wasn't offended. He didn't doubt my assessment, he was just curious and cautious.

Henry Drew, whom you always have to look at twice to make sure he's really there, whispered, "Oh, yes. Martin would make his offer through Parnell; nothing more."

Fernie accepted that. Henry Drew and Martin Stover had been fighting each other for decades. Henry loathed him and, since Pam Drew had died, he had studied Martin with lover-like fidelity.

Drew went on, "I'm inclined to believe that dear old Martin is comparatively close to us, geographically speaking, at this moment." There was another faint stir, a communal sitting up. Martin Stover had gone on three weeks' furlough the previous night. He was supposed to be fishing a remote Highland loch, but there was no sign of him there.

Naturally, there was no record of him leaving the country either. Espionage people keep passports and identities in reserve; it's their security blanket.

Drew said dreamily, "Martin Stover, Martin Stover—he'll make his own way there. He'll dawdle. There's only one chance in a million of our catching him en route, but he'll be in a constant ferment, playing with the idea of a tap on the shoulder."

"Or a bullet in the guts," Sir Edgar growled. He wanted that. None of us looked at him.

Henry was right, of course. Martin would want the big reception, the limousine to the Kremlin, the deferential debriefing with important people hanging on every word, before sweeping off to his dacha, the girls, the boys, the Southern Comfort flown in for him, and the Black Sea tan.

I could almost see Martin moving through France or Germany, slanting eastward. New name, subtly altered appearance. He was good, no two

ways about it; he'd be into the Soviet Union before they knew, taking great pleasure in telling them how he'd done it. If a few border guards got the chop, that would just be the cherry atop Martin's whipped cream.

Of course, I was very tired. For an instant I expected to glance left and find Martin lounging there, doing the *Telegraph* crossword not quite out of sight, a handkerchief spilling from the sleeve of his jacket.

Eyes closed, I said, "Pete Essen may have three days' grace. Stover's been in transit for about eight hours so far. He'll dawdle but he won't put down roots. Three days plus eight hours."

"Not long enough," said Sir Edgar. He was old, but now he looked frighteningly old. His bones were very evident under the parchment.

Gerald Fernie giggled; and it was like a slap in the face. He sat fingering his raven's-wing forelock, his pouchy eyes squeezing shut with amusement—he might have been a very large boy preparing to tell us he'd bored a peephole into the girls' locker room. But what he said was, "It shouldn't be beyond our wit to buy more time. . . .

"I say! It would be a bit of a jape if we could *kill* Martin Stover!"

The only excuse for any of us, Fernie included, is that we were under pressure and working against the clock. In such situations, the quality of a decision counts less than it being arrived at.

Gerald Fernie's suggestion was so outrageous that it might—well, it wouldn't *work*, but it might just take long enough *not* to work.

Consider this: Martin Stover arrives in Moscow bursting to tell his new friends about our operations there. But a few hours before his appearance, they learn that Martin Stover has died in England.

It would take very little time to confirm his identity; but even that very little time, added to what we had, was worth winning. There were fringe benefits too. Confirmed identity or not, Stover would be under a faint cloud; he wouldn't be in mint condition. He'd deliver agents' names, but the men in long overcoats might walk quickly instead of running. Which can be all the leeway an agent needs.

Further, Martin Stover—arrogant, rotted with drink, nerves eroded after living on them all his life—would be skittish. If his Moscow reception wasn't blissful, the well-done-thou-good-and-faithless-servant stuff a trifle tarnished, he might be less talkative. He would keep things back for bargaining power.

Knowing Martin, he was capable of flying into a rage and refusing to



tell them anything straight off. That would last for half a day—they'd smooth him down, not sweat him, because he was useful as a propaganda showpiece if nothing else—then he'd come around and be unable to stop talking. And all the while the clocks would be racing.

It was an alluring vista, to be sure. A pity that somebody really did have to get killed though.

"We'll kill him then," Sir Edgar agreed, and Gerald Fernie rubbed his hands. But it wasn't as simple as that.

There were factors in our favor. Martin Stover hadn't been out of England since 1960, and he'd always stayed in the background. There would be photographs somewhere from his spell at the Washington embassy in the 1950s, however, and his fingerprints were on record in the United States and Britain.

As soon as Sir Edgar agreed to the scheme, I arranged for Stover's fingerprints to be withdrawn and nicely aged fakes put in their place. The Comrades would get to them, make comparisons, and wonder in theory, with luck. It was all hideously iffy, as Fernie acknowledged from the start.

Another favorable factor was that the only opposition figure who'd known Martin Stover at all intimately was Parnell—and he, like Marley in the Charles Dickens story, was dead.

There were factors against us too. If we were trying to feed Moscow a fake Stover, then we'd have the real one tucked away—in a grave or in a jail. So how could news of his death leak out?

Fernie suggested Glebelands.

Glebelands was a mock-Tudor mansion in Sussex, on the cliffs near Brighton. The house swung in and out of fashion with the Department. We'd used it to debrief eminent defectors, or those we wanted to feel important. When Maintenant came out of the Siberian work camp in 1964 on an exchange, he recuperated there with his family and was as fit as he ever would be again before most people knew he was back, far less where he was.

Glebelands hadn't been active for years, but Martin Stover had used the place for an extended period quite recently, and the opposition knew of the house and its background. We might well lock him away there.

The corpse was obtained from a London teaching hospital and we

smuggled it into Glebelands soon after the conference adjourned. It was Stover's height and build to within an inch or so.

When not in use, Glebelands is looked after by Charlie Feather, a rangy, red-faced old devil with a game leg and a Victorian cavalry officer's abrupt manner. He is also my cousin and my closest friend. We went through the Burma campaign together, at the dawn of time, as infantry subalterns.

He'd lived there for the best part of twenty years, so when I outlined what was going on and what was about to happen he looked sick. "All good things come to an end," I said.

"Don't they just." Charlie ran a knuckle along his moustache. "It's a funny old world we live in." We'd always quoted that hackneyed old line when it was hopelessly inadequate to the situation.

We were driving away, the Army explosives-expert and I, when Glebelands blew up. Something to do with the gas-fired central heating system, I understand. Gas had built up in the boiler room and had been ignited by a spark.

Charlie Feather would escape with minor injuries. The man staying with him would be unluckier.

The evening papers were running a few paragraphs by the time we got back to London. Charlie Feather had trained racehorses for a while after World War II, before I recruited him to run Glebelands. More to the point, he'd been married to an (eventually) notorious actress. He was still copy, or just about.

IRENE LARA'S HUSBAND CHEATS DEATH IN BLAST HORROR, summed up the initial line. Charlie and Irene had been divorced for decades, but headline writers can be very free and easy when frantic to catch the wandering eye.

I rang my tame crime reporter, who'd made it to the Big Brash National Newspaper on the strength of good tips from people like me. Eddie Cormack thought I was a retired detective-inspector with Special Branch contacts, left-wing tendencies, and a nagging grudge against the Establishment.

"Eddie, that explosion down near Brighton—"

"The old fool must have struck a match, looking for a gas leak." But there was an edge to his voice. I didn't phone often.

"This has got to be worth a hundred, Eddie." Nobody values freebies.

"The chap who died, the so-called guest. Charlie Feather has been on the bottle since Irene Lara divorced him. He doesn't entertain. Not unless Whitehall pays for it. Know what I mean?"

"I think so." Very casual now, but he'd be salivating.

"The so-called guest was a man named Martin Stover. He worked for the Foreign Office, as they say. And here's something interesting. The inquest will be tomorrow and they want the whole thing open and shut and finished with the same day. The inquest will be on somebody called Stuart Rackham. Look in *Who's Who*, Eddie, and see what Martin Stover's two middle names are."

Henry Drew brought the first edition of the BBNN in at 10:32 P.M. We all craned over his shoulder. Eddie Cormack had done us proud. MYSTERY DEATH OF A MYSTERY MAN was the second lead on the front page, with a turn-over on page two—a column of speculation with the subhead, "Was It a Bomb?" and a flag urging us to turn to the centerfold spread.

Gerald Fernie whistled softly. "An embarrassment of riches," he murmured, frog eyes bulging, foot tapping gleefully.

There were pictures on the spread—blurry, archive stuff. Martin Stover, a slim curly-haired youngster, chest crossed by cartridge belts, swigging wine with a group of Yugoslavian partisans in 1944. Stover in the reception line for an absurdly young Queen Elizabeth II at an embassy affair. A small photo of Glebelands, with the breathless caption that the place wasn't owned by Charlie Feather but by the government. An aerial view of the house with a gaping hole at the back, police car, fire engines, and an ambulance clustered like a small shoal of sharks on the gravel lake where the drive widened at the front door.

By one in the morning the second editions of the BBNN's rivals were out, all with sketchy attempts to match Cormack's coup. Fleet Street does love a good spy story.

We argued about my attending the inquest. Obviously the Comrades would have observers there. But if we *had* been keeping Martin Stover under wraps, one of us was bound to return to the scene of the crime, as it were.

It all went beautifully. The court was packed with reporters, Eddie Cormack basking in their envy, snapping at a couple of kids there to help

him out with minor chores such as accuracy and shorthand. I recognized the London stringer for an American paper and the bureau chief of one of their newsmagazines.

The coroner was bewildered.

When the preliminaries were under way, a heavy-set, beautifully dressed man rose and said he was Bernard Grealle, a solicitor representing the Ministry of Whatever. Resentfully, he said that a lot of wild stories had appeared in the Press and that he was present on a watching brief and in the interests of truth.

Eddie Cormack was looking hard at another lawyer with blow-dried hair and an even nicer suit. The dandy rose, bowed to the coroner, and explained that he was representing Miss Anna Stover.

Cormack winked at me. He was sharp as a rat in a roomful of terriers, that one. Evidently he'd got to Martin Stover's sister and persuaded her there was something fishy. A solicitor was needed to look after her interests, and the kindly BBNN would pay. . .

The inquest that day was an anti-climax. Formal evidence of identification by Charlie Feather—head bandaged, getting a lot of sympathy for the limp since few realized that he'd had an artificial leg since 1945—and Stover's sister. Lord knows how they were supposed to have done it, because Captain Perkins had reduced the body to anonymous, sundered components.

Bernard Grealle got up again and wanted it made plain that there had been no attempt to pass off the dead man as a certain Stuart Rackham rather than Martin Stuart Rackham Stover. It struck me as clumsy, but the reporters loved it.

The inquest was adjourned for seven days.

Pete Essen couldn't believe it. Even Gerald Fernie was as much awed as jubilant. Either Stover hadn't yet reached Moscow or the ploy was working and they didn't believe him. As far as we could tell nothing was happening to our networks.

It seemed that Stover must still be moving across Europe. Once he told them the names, our agents would be arrested whether he was believed or not. Checks could be made at leisure.

That remained the state of play until the inquest reopened.

Charlie Feather made a splendid witness. He didn't try to act, he

simply didn't want to answer questions—which was very much his style in any event. Anna Stover's lawyer gave him a rotten time.

"You say that Martin Stover had been your guest for several days. You were close friends, then?"

Charlie stared back and had to be reminded to answer.

"Yes."

The lawyer grinned at his notes. "I see. Tell me, was Martin Stover fond of bridge and chess?"

Charlie Feather didn't know.

"What was his favorite nightcap? What did he drink, in the way of spirits, during this chummy stay at your home?"

Charlie couldn't recall offhand. Scotch, he supposed.

At the back of the court I noticed a balding, thin-faced gnome of a chap who'd been a prisoner of war working on a Lincolnshire farm after World War II and had never gone home again. He was supposed to be an author. He was writing down every word.

An hour later, Anna Stover's solicitor said, "So we arrive at this stage: your great and good friend Martin Stover—who never touched Scotch, by the way—stayed at your 'home' for several days and never set foot out of it?"

Charlie looked genuinely evasive and desperate. His face was sweaty, red in hectic patches, and the big moustache drooped. "He wasn't much for the outdoors," he mumbled.

The lawyer's tone was sharp, not really asking the question: "Was Martin Stover under any form of restraint? Weren't you not a genial host, not a dispenser of hospitality to a man it's evident you hardly knew, *but a keeper, a warder?*"

Charlie didn't have to answer. He seemed eager to try, but everybody was talking at once and evening-paper reporters with deadlines were scrambling for the door. The inquest was adjourned again.

Outside the court, the wind was fresh off the sea and you could hear waves in the distance. It was peaceful after the frenetic, suspicion-laden dueling. I leaned against my car and lit a cigarette. Approaching Charlie was out of the question, but seeing me around might cheer him up when he came out.

A few photographers were doing the hovering-vulture act just outside the precincts of the coroner's court, where it was illegal for them to work,

but Charlie would stump out through the front entrance, past the picture men. He wasn't much good at sneaking off.

The boy wore a caramel-colored duffel coat with pale, varnished-wood toggles. Lank red hair framed a face that would look equally in place above jeans and sweatshirt or a dress. "Did you know Martin?" he demanded, half challenging, half hopeful.

"A long time ago. It all seems very strange. I can't make out what's been going on." Ever the innocent, me.

The boy sneered. "They killed him, that's what went on! He hated that house, Glebelands. He told me so. Martin would *never* have gone there for a holiday. And if he had, he'd have phoned me. I live at Brighton, and I could have been with him in minutes."

He shook his head, whimpering. "Martin would drive all the way down to Brighton when he was feeling low, just to spend—" he gave me a sidelong look, then tossed his head "—a night with me!"

I made one of those wordless, sympathetic noises. The kid had probably been aimed at me on a fishing expedition. "That evil old man!" he burst out. "Martin detested him. The old swine murdered him and blew the house up just to cover himself. You must have seen the guilt dripping off him in court!"

Well, that was what we'd wanted to convey. And if the opposition was nibbling at the edges of an admittedly ramshackle deception—as they were, or the boy wouldn't be giving me this song and dance—it was a blessing.

"You mean Mr. Feather?" I asked and he sneered prettily. "Well—he put up a very poor showing, *I* thought. Fishy," I agreed heavily. "Very fishy all around."

Then Charlie Feather was steaming past us. His color was better and I guessed he'd used the hip flask. I stared through him. He knuckled his moustache and gave me and the boy a blast-your-impudence stare.

It happened so fast.

The boy moved, a caramel blur of shrieking action, and Charlie, his arms flailing for balance, fell back with a big red carnation of blood tucked just behind his regimental tie.

By the time the first policeman reacted, I had pinned the boy and taken his sheath knife. He was weeping for Martin Stover, but Charlie Feather needed the tears.

He died on the way to the hospital . . .

I tried to keep out of Gerald Fernie's way in the weeks before I argued them into accepting my resignation. Fernie, beneath and behind all the nonsense, was a relentlessly honest man. He would have been forced to point out that Charlie's death was a bonus for us and a tribute to the ploy's effectiveness.

And I would have been forced to—I don't know what. Our paths never crossed—I actually locked myself in a washroom once to ensure that—and I'd never know what.

I mustn't forget Bruno Capaldi, and the cream of the jest.

Signor Capaldi, a tire salesman from Turin, was felled by a heart attack while leaving one of the better brothels of Marseilles. Understandably, the madam had her staff smuggle him off the doorstep to be dumped on waste ground near the docks.

They stole his billfold and passport in the process, but overlooked a letter from his wife which the late Bruno Capaldi was carrying in his breast pocket. The French police passed the news to Italy; the widow, along with Capaldi's home and employers, couldn't be located.

Very slowly, inquiries filtered through to London via Interpol, and eventually one of our lot flew to France, where they pulled open a morgue drawer.

Capaldi, as you will have guessed, was Martin Stover, traveling incognito. He'd died, the French pathologist assured me, several hours before we even knew he was missing.

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# LETTERS



In reference to Betty Ren Wright's "The Big One" in the April 23, 1980 issue of *AHMM*, I do not see how the main character, Barbara, could have "missed her chance" even though her brother-in-law cut the wires to her freezer so that the fish thawed out. All she would have to do is drain the freezer, allow it and the fish to freeze, and claim her prize as planned. . . Surely if Barbara was clever enough to arrange her husband's murder, she could figure all that out.

I dearly love *AHMM*—wouldn't miss an issue. Keep up the good work, all of you.

L. G. Beard  
Pomona, California

*I guess Barbara didn't think of your suggestion. The story did mention that she didn't know how to take advantage of most opportunities. Thanks for writing.—S.C.G.*

---

I have been a subscriber to *AHMM* for more years than I like to count. I discovered Hitchcock at an early age. All of the stories are great, and the illustrations on the cover are simply priceless, but the one on the cover of the May issue deserves the gold medal—if you get my meaning.

Margaret D. Smith  
Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

I'm a collector and I need Alfred Hitchcock's Anthology #5, the February 1975 issue of *AHMM*, and any older copies. Please state price, issue number, and condition.

Charles Gaskin  
5 Ferncrest Blvd.  
North Providence, Rhode Island 02911

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Sometimes a reader of *AHMM* has a peculiar morbid taste for horror instilled in his or her blood. But the blood of Jack Ritchie's "Cardula" stories has failed to be resurrected for over a year now. Why is that? My thirst needs to be quenched by the return of "Cardula" no matter what price in blood the beautiful editor has to pay.

Gary Seiler  
Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

*Mr. Ritchie, are you listening?*—S.C.G.

---

One story in the April 23, 1980 issue deserves a special comment—"The Attaché Case" by Ernest Savage. In my opinion, this story is real *literature* and deserves to be included in literary anthologies along with Frank Stockton's "The Lady, or the Tiger?" and Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." Mr. Savage should be highly praised for his work.

Thank you, also, for starting the Letters column. It is a real addition to the magazine.

Carrell Rainey  
Pleasantville, Pennsylvania

In Ernest Savage's interesting story, "The Attaché Case," it seems obvious to me that after Baker tossed the case out and "saw a head appear at the lip of the bank," a farmer picked it up, took it back to his barn, managed to get it open, and was surprised to find it filled with dioplexythorozide . . . or thoryplexydziozene . . . or TXY or whatever it was.

Malcolm McClintick  
Indianapolis, Indiana

*"The Attaché Case" received a great deal of favorable comment. Thanks to all of you who wrote, and to Mr. Savage!—S.C.G.*

---

I liked Dick Stodghill's "Road Trip" in the March 26 issue, but I have one question to ask. I may not be able to tell you who hit the most home runs in 1911, but as far as I know, a twi-nighter is still two games. What happened to the second game in the story?

Greg Burton  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

*You're right; scheduled twi-night games are always double-headers. But sometimes a make-up game is played (as when a regular scheduled game is rained out) at an odd time. That's what happened in this case. Believe me.—S.C.G.*

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Your magazine has really grown over the past few months. Your authors are exceptionally talented. I especially like William Bankier. His themes are very original, e.g., "Making a Killing With Mama Cass" in the January 30 issue.

M. McMasters  
Truro, Nova Scotia, Canada

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I've often wanted to compliment *AHMM* on the way the story blurbs are handled. I sometimes avoid reading a story when the blurb reveals a highlight of the plot. But *AHMM* blurbs are provocative rather than revealing, tempting one to read the full story.

Fred Ebel  
Altamonte Springs, Florida



*Barstow had been described as the last of the corporate heavy-weights . . .*

# WEEKEND RETREAT

by  
STEPHEN  
WASYLYK



In Gaylord Dean, ambition flourished like a bitter weed taking root in the crack of a city pavement. Though often trampled, the weed survives against all odds and continues to grow until one day it cracks the very cement surrounding it unless it is torn out by the roots.

So when Dean learned he was to be passed over for president of the corporation in favor of Jordan Fenner, he swiveled in his soft office chair, tented his hands as he looked out over the city, and began to think of a

way he could move into the president's penthouse where he felt he belonged.

A solid, columnar figure of a man, he was built as though he had been destined to carry great weight on his shoulders. His hands were big and square, his jaw the same, the strength in his face in keeping with the head of grey hair that was almost leonine. He had parlayed his appearance, his deep resonant voice, and his unscrupulous character into the executive vice-president's corner suite only one floor below the penthouse he already considered his and which was now threatening to elude his grasp.

As the secretary who sat in on all of the board meetings had explained to him covertly, the problem was not that he lacked supporters among the nine members. He had four locked up. The problem was that two he had counted on had switched allegiance: Smith, the solemn-faced banker who reminded him of an old-time preacher, and Nathan Barstow, a former president who was chairman of the board.

Smith's defection didn't surprise Dean. The man was basically undependable. Personality and past performance counted for little with him when he sensed an opportunity to turn over a dollar more quickly. And he had a tendency to hold back until he saw which side Barstow was going to take.

The key was Barstow. Bring him back and Smith would come along, even though his vote would be superfluous.

Barstow was a big, blunt man with hamlike hands, the last of the corporation's presidents to come out of the manufacturing end of the business. His shirts, though expensive, didn't seem to fit. Neither did his suits. But somehow no one seemed to notice, or, if they did, they forgot it very quickly. He was a rough man and a tough one. A feature writer for one of the business magazines had once described him as the last of the corporate heavyweights, referring not only to his power but to the fact that in his younger days it hadn't been unusual for Barstow to back up his opinions with his fists. The story was legend of when, newly appointed president, he had wanted to close an unprofitable plant. The manager of the plant had protested vehemently. With one swing, Barstow had knocked him down, and the plant had been closed.

As president, he had been followed by two others, both of whom had died shortly after taking office. One was from Sales, the other from Accounting.

Neither had been anything like Barstow. But Dean was.

Only more polished. And now he had a problem.

Dean considered his options.

He could eliminate Fenner. Dean knew people who could take care of this quietly and subtly, as they had on two previous occasions when people had stood in his way. But Dean really didn't want to get rid of Fenner. He could use his talent and ability. In fact, he saw no reason why Fenner shouldn't eventually be president. But not before Dean had served his turn. No—the thing to do was convince Barstow to change his mind.

Unfortunately, Barstow's mind wasn't easy to change. A careful, methodical man, he weighed all his decisions and stayed with them until proven wrong. In Barstow's case, that wasn't very often.

Dean swiveled from the window. Whatever he did, he had only the weekend to do it. He and Barstow were scheduled to spend the two days together at the lodge as part of a corporate policy that brought executives together on a rotating basis so that they could get to know each other without the trappings of formality, the pressures of business, or the distraction of wives. It gave the older men the opportunity to evaluate the younger ones, and the younger ones the opportunity to express themselves freely in an informal atmosphere. The consulting psychologist who had sold the company the idea considered it exciting, the older men tolerated it, and the younger ones clearly thought it stupid.

Unfortunately, Dean wouldn't have Barstow all to himself. One of the junior-level executives, an aggressive assistant district sales manager named Parkhurst, would be with them.

Dean didn't know much about Parkhurst, but that was what the weekend get-togethers were designed to cure. He did know that the man had nerve. Parkhurst had come to the attention of the executive hierarchy by walking into the office of the purchasing agent of a potential customer who had threatened to eject any representative of the corporation who appeared in his office. Parkhurst explained that the client's attitude was based on an incident that had happened years ago and that Parkhurst's company was wet behind the ears at the time but was now in a position to save the client a great deal of money. He had walked out with a substantial order.

Dean would have preferred that Parkhurst not be there, but he couldn't change the arrangement without raising questions. So, whatever he did,

he would have to work around him. An idea half formed, he pushed the buzzer for his secretary.

She was a tall, slim, dark-haired woman in her thirties, with a subdued elegance. Her discretion was equaled only by her efficiency.

"As you know, Mr. Barstow and I will be at the lodge this weekend," he said.

She nodded.

"I'd like to have one bottle of Mr. Barstow's favorite bourbon on hand," Dean told her. "Only one."

Her eyes flickered but she said nothing. They both knew Barstow often indulged in heavy drinking on the lodge weekends.

Dean extracted several bills from beneath his money clip and placed them on the edge of the desk. "That's for Paul. Will it be sufficient?"

She smiled and folded the bills into her palm. "More than enough. I'll drive up there this afternoon. Is there anything else?"

His voice was thoughtful. "Perhaps there is a potential point of conflict between Barstow and Parkhurst—something that doesn't appear in Parkhurst's personnel file."

"Would taking part in a campus protest do?"

Dean leaned forward. "Concerning what?"

"The building of a nuclear-energy plant."

"Do you have the facts?"

"When I learned he was to be there on the weekend, I questioned a few people. Would you like me to type it up?"

He nodded. "One copy only."

She left and he leaned back. Things might fall into place yet. Barstow had an extreme dislike for people who protested anything. "No regard for the law," was his contemptuous reaction. "Without the law, what do we have?"

He had mellowed a bit lately, but not much.

Dean smiled.

It was almost noon on Saturday when he turned off the Interstate. The lodge was located some twenty miles up the side of one of the rolling mountains, five miles away from the nearest town, which was nothing more than a village.

The flat, rambling building had been built as a weekend retreat by one of the former company presidents, who had sold it to the corporation.

Constructed of native stone, the upper floor was a series of bedrooms. The lower contained a game room, a den, and other living quarters. All looked out over the broad valley. Outside the game room a large balcony with a waist-high railing jutted out over the steep hillside which fell abruptly before rolling down to the river.

Dean drove up the narrow lane that led to the lodge and parked beside the two cars already there—a luxury sedan and a small, much used sports-car. Barstow preferred not to use the services of a chauffeur, saying, “You can provide one for me when I’m on the way to the cemetery.”

Paul, young, broad-shouldered, and bearded, looking not at all like the caretaker-cook he was, came to take his bag. “The others are in the den,” he said. “They said they’d wait lunch until you arrived. Is there anything special you’d like?”

“A salad and a beer,” said Dean.

Paul smiled. “I thought as much.”

When Dean entered the den, Barstow was seated in one of the leather-covered wing chairs. Parkhurst was perched on the arm of a sofa, looking out over the view. He was slender, a quick and nervous type who would probably never have a weight problem. His brown hair was straight and lopped off at a respectable length.

He stood and offered his hand to Dean. “It’s nice to see you, sir.”

Barstow raised his glass, ice cubes tinkling. “Not a moment too soon, Dean. One more of these before lunch and my doctor would have my head.”

The plan that had been lurking in his subconscious began forming late that afternoon when they were sitting in the lounge chairs on the balcony. The three had played a few games of snooker and talked, and the afternoon had gone quickly. It was clear that Barstow intended to make this one of his drinking weekends. He had already put away enough bourbon to put another man under one of the wrought-iron tables.

Parkhurst had conducted himself carefully, almost cautiously, knowing that his future with the corporation depended on the opinion of the two older men. Dean felt that he wasn’t seeing the real Parkhurst, that the younger man was playing the game the way he thought it was supposed to be played.

Still, in spite of Parkhurst’s caution, Dean sensed a growing antagonism between the two men, not unusual between strong men from different



generations, backgrounds, and lifestyles. Barstow was a hard-line conservative who had made his way at Parkhurst's age through his own efforts, cherishing each little victory because it was hard won. He saw Parkhurst as a kid who had had everything handed to him and therefore was without experience in the things that really mattered, and entitled to no opinions at all—much less the liberal ones he espoused.

But Barstow had observed young men like Parkhurst for years now and had finally come to accept them because they were now in the majority. It didn't prevent him from tightening up at some of Parkhurst's remarks, but he always subdued his personal feelings when it came to the corporation. Perhaps, Dean thought, that was one reason he drank so heavily.

When the plan came to full bloom in Dean's mind he looked at the glass in Barstow's hand and decided to give him one last chance. Parkhurst had gone inside and they were alone. Dean perched on the railing of the balcony, looking down at the tall pines far below. "I heard about the discussion about me at the board meeting," he said.

Barstow grunted. "So much for our so-called security."

"I'd like to know why," said Dean. "You were always with me before."

Barstow sipped his drink and held it before him, studying it before replying. "In the past," he said slowly. He seemed to lose his train of thought and Dean didn't know if it was because of the bourbon or because he was thinking of days long gone. "But things are different now, and will continue to be different. The trouble with you, Dean, is that you're too much like me. We're both of us heavy-handed. We run things our way and if people don't like it, we figure they can get out. But it can't be that way any longer.

"Fenner is different. He's light on his feet. If the corporation is going to grow, that's the kind of man we need, someone who can handle the government agencies and consumer groups and keep them off our back. Someone who can see new markets where you and I see only the old ones. Someone who can deal with labor, make it accept things without resentment. Someone who can use a young punk like Parkhurst and get him to do things our way and make him think it's his own idea." He shook his head. "I can't do that, and neither can you. But I think Fenner can. Our day is done."

"I think not," said Dean. "Maybe a couple of years down the road—"

"No," said Barstow. "Now." He finished his drink. "Where's Paul? I need another one of these."

Dean pressed the buzzer.

Paul and Parkhurst arrived together at the door.

Barstow held up his glass.

Paul said, "There's no more bourbon."

Barstow stiffened. "What the hell are we paying you for? You knew I'd be here this weekend! Did you think I had given up drinking?"

"Take it easy," said Dean. "It's no major problem. Paul can run down to the village and be back in half an hour with a few bottles."

"That isn't the point!" snapped Barstow. "He knows who's coming here these weekends and he's given a list of what to have on hand! In my case, he shouldn't need a list! Maybe it's time to replace him with someone with sufficient intelligence to do the job he's getting paid to do!"

Dean nodded to Paul, who disappeared, and waited until he heard the station wagon pull away. "Paul's a good man," he said. "Everyone makes mistakes."

"Not around me!" snapped Barstow.

Parkhurst had joined Dean on the railing, his arms folded. "Dean's right. There was no reason to speak to him that way."

Barstow stood and faced him, his face red. "You're telling *me* what I should and shouldn't do?"

"I'm protesting what I consider the unfair and demeaning treatment of a human being."

Dean moved away from the railing. "Parkhurst is an expert at protesting," he said mildly.

Barstow's head swiveled. "What do you mean?"

"He once spent a few days in prison for trespassing while leading a protest march against an atomic-energy installation."

"And now he's working for *us*?" Barstow was incredulous.

Dean shrugged. "As you said, these are new times. If he felt he had to protest, he was entitled to. It has nothing to do with his qualifications for employment."

"In *your* book," snapped Barstow, "but not in mine!" He swayed slightly, like a tree in a gentle wind, his chin thrust forward, and Dean, who had seen him this way before, knew he was on the verge of passing out.

Parkhurst took a deep breath. "Then it's time you got out, you Neanderthal," he said. "Get off the board and make room for someone who belongs there in this day and age."

Dean almost laughed. He understood now how Parkhurst had made the big sale that had earned him his reputation. He was sure of himself, and he had nerve.

Barstow's hand flicked out and slapped Parkhurst across the mouth.

Parkhurst stood, his eyes wide, completely dumbfounded. Then anger took over, a white and visible anger that made him reach out and push distastefully at Barstow's chest, as if at something unpleasant that had to be shoved out of the way.

Barstow retaliated with a roundhouse a two-year-old could have avoided. Parkhurst stepped back contemptuously. Barstow's fist brushed his chest and Barstow, off balance, stumbled and fell. As he fell, Dean stepped forward and rammed a hand into Parkhurst's chest, driving him backward so that the railing caught him from behind and he went over, his hands frantically clutching the air.

For a moment he seemed to hang there, his eyes unbelieving and terrified, and then he was gone, leaving behind a chilling, fading scream that echoed sharply from the surrounding hills.

Dean heard tree limbs snap sharply and underbrush crackle as Parkhurst hit. Then there was only the raucous, squawking protest of a bird whose nest had been disturbed.

Dean lifted Barstow to his feet, struggling against the dead weight as Barstow's legs sagged and his head lolled.

*"You knocked him off the balcony!"* he yelled into Barstow's ear.

Barstow straightened a little, his eyes blinking. "What?"

*"You knocked Parkhurst off the balcony!"*

Barstow stared at Dean dully. Dean placed an arm around his shoulders. "Can you understand me?"

Barstow licked his lips and nodded.

"We'll say it was an accident. Parkhurst had too much to drink, and he stumbled and fell."

Barstow swayed slightly. "An accident?"

"That's what we'll tell the sheriff!"

Barstow nodded. "An accident." He sank into a chair with his chin on his chest, mumbled to himself, and fell asleep.

Dean looked up to see Paul standing in the doorway.

"There's been an accident. Parkhurst fell off the balcony. Call the sheriff and get an ambulance out here. I'm going down to see if I can help him."

"Better let me do that," said Paul. "The ground is pretty rough down there."

But Parkhurst might have survived the fall, and Dean had to guarantee that he wouldn't survive to tell who had pushed him. "Just do as you're told," he snapped. "Considering who we are, the sheriff may be inclined to make a big deal of this, just for the publicity."

"He'll ask me what happened."

"Parkhurst was trying to impress Barstow with his capacity for drink. He had too much, couldn't handle it, stumbled, and went over the railing. It was an accident."

By the time the body had been brought up the hill and sent to the morgue and Dean had carefully explained everything to the sheriff several times, it was well into the night. Barstow had slept off most of the bourbon and now sat looking miserable while Dean talked.

The sheriff, who knew him, treated Barstow with deference. He had avoided questioning him directly, preferring to ask, "Was that how it was, Mr. Barstow?" in a tone that indicated he regretted having to question him at all.

After he had gone, Dean and Barstow sat alone in the den. Barstow was hunched forward, his hands clasped between his knees, as if the night air had chilled him. "It was my fault, wasn't it?" he asked.

"Forget it," said Dean.

Barstow rubbed his face "I don't remember. I just don't remember."

"It's done. Let it be the way I told the sheriff. What purpose would be served by telling people you took a swing at him and knocked him over? The newsmen would rake you over the coals, the corporation would be hurt, you'd stand trial for manslaughter—and none of it would bring Parkhurst back. You're too important to too many people. After you sleep on it, you'll agree that I'm right."

"Sleep?" Barstow scrubbed at his face again. "I won't be able to sleep for a long time." He stared at the floor. "Funny, I can't remember anything, but I think I heard him scream."

"Go to bed," said Dean comfortingly. "We'll leave in the morning. Naturally, we'll see that his widow gets a generous settlement."

"Of course," said Barstow wearily. "Whatever you think is right." He started toward the door, then hesitated. "And, Dean—about that presidency. Maybe I was wrong."

"You were always a fair man," said Dean. "A man who paid his debts."

Their eyes met and locked. Barstow stood there for a long time, staring at Gaylord Dean, before he nodded and walked out.

It was traditional for the board to have the man who had received a major promotion come to the board room, where he was met by the chairman in the small reception office and, as Barstow had once observed dryly, "given a chance to speak before sentence was pronounced."

The call came for Dean a few minutes after eleven. He smiled at the excitement on his secretary's face and rode the elevator to the penthouse.

Barstow met him at the reception office.

"I'm pleased that you changed your mind," said Dean.

Barstow nodded. "Before we go in, I'd like to talk to you."

"About what?" asked Dean.

"Saturday."

"I told you there was nothing to worry about. I intend to tell no one, and the sheriff was convinced it was an accident."

"I wasn't."

Dean felt his palms grow wet. "I told you how it happened!"

"I know you did, more than once. But all along I felt I hadn't knocked him off the balcony at all, though of course in my condition I couldn't be sure of it. But if I *hadn't* done it, how had it happened? Parkhurst wasn't drunk enough to have fallen. He certainly didn't commit suicide. And, as far as I could see, *you* had no reason to push him." Barstow paused. "At least that was what I thought until I realized you expected me to change my vote because you were covering up for me."

Dean let his voice show indignation. "You're not accusing me—"

"I couldn't do that without proof, could I?"

"No, you damn well couldn't!"

Barstow sighed. "Paul saw it all."

Dean felt a jolt somewhere below his heart. "He wasn't even in the house."

"He didn't have to be. He never went for the bourbon. He had plenty of it on hand. When you tried to bribe him to tell me he had run out, he knew it was simply to get him out of the way, so he pretended to accommodate you. He drove down the lane, parked, and walked back to where he could watch us on the balcony."

Dean swallowed, his throat suddenly dry. "If you believe him, then—"

why am I here?" he cried, taking refuge in righteous anger.

"Sit down," said Barstow quietly.

Trembling, Dean sat.

"Knowing what you did still left me with a choice," said Barstow. "I had to weigh your value to the corporation against several factors. Parkhurst's life. I couldn't bring him back and, as you pointed out, the publicity could hurt the corporation. If a man in my position is important to a great many people, so are you. Furthermore, from a purely personal viewpoint, you tried to use me—which no one has ever done successfully. It was, to use an expression popular with young people, a 'heavy' decision."

Barstow's voice was calm, his face resigned, and Dean realized that Barstow could have said all this without calling him here. Unless—

Feeling his tension ease, he smiled and rose.

"Evidently you decided in my favor. I appreciate it deeply."

"We all receive what we earn. For some, it takes longer than others. I want you to know that, even though it took a bit of persuasion on my part, the decision was unanimous. As you said, I always pay my debts. Shall we go in?" Barstow opened the board-room door and Dean stepped through, primed for the smiles and congratulatory handshakes of the board members.

The room was unlit, and empty except for one man at the far end of the large walnut table. The sun was behind him so that he appeared as just a silhouette, yet somehow he looked ominous and threatening as he rose to his feet. Dean wondered what kind of silly game Barstow was playing until he saw the broad-brimmed hat on the table.

"I've been waiting for you, Mr. Dean," said the sheriff.

**The October 1 issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's  
Mystery Magazine* will be on sale September 9.**

*The jewelry was kept in the bank except for special occasions . . .*

# THE WORLD ACCORDING TO UNCLE ALBERT by PENELOPE WALLACE



**M**y uncle was mad about Sherlock Holmes.  
Sometimes I just thought he was mad.

He had this enormous magnifying glass and, when he wasn't rereading *The Master*, he was cantering around the ample grounds of his country estate, waving it around. "A big dog's been through this thicket," he said.

"Yes, a Great Dane called Hound. *Your* Great Dane. You walked him through here this morning."

His embarrassment was fleeting. "I'd have known anyway, from the paw marks," he said scathingly.

"If you use that great thing in the afternoon sun, you'll start a fire," I told him. I'd just snagged my pantihose and I reflected for the hundredth time that the proper apparel for a stroll through Uncle Albert's underbrush was slacks.

Uncle Albert was against slacks. Women should look feminine and behave in a feminine way—preferably in high necks and long skirts as in dear old Sherlock's day. He didn't want an Irene Adler in the family.

I'd once pointed out to him that there were other crime writers. It was like telling a religious bigot that there were other churches.

I always explain to any visitors who my uncle means when he speaks of The Master. We'd had a nasty interlude when one of my old school friends thought he was referring to Noel Coward.

I should, perhaps, explain that I live by myself in London, but Uncle Albert is my only living relative and, despite what he calls my aggressive modernity, he seems to like me, so I come down most weekends.

This Friday afternoon was particularly hot and, after my remarks about starting a fire, he reluctantly agreed that we retrace our steps.

He always wears an inverness for these walks—just like you-know-whose—and he stowed the magnifying glass away in a large pocket. "About the party—" I began. But he bent suddenly over a thorny bush, dragging out his "eye of God" and peering intently.

"That's not Hound's hair," he announced. "It's some fine shreds and—yes, by Jove, it's blood!"

"Group 'O'," I told him. "Rhesus Positive."

He turned, amazed.

"How—?"

I pointed to my leg. "My blood," I told him. "And shreds of my pantihose."

He put away the magnifying glass and walked with me, rather huffily, back to the house.

I wondered whether I should apologize for scratching my leg or if I should have left a little notice: "Here lies the fine blood of Frances Stephen—wounded while on lawful pursuits."

Uncle relented when we were back in the drawing room. "Tea now, I think," he said, and rang the bell by the fireplace. "After tea I think I'll dip into *The Hound of the Baskervilles*."



The Great Dane uncurled himself at the sound of his name and ambled over to see if he was missing anything—like tea, I thought, the way that dog eats.

Poor Uncle. Mrs. Hubbard, the housekeeper, had refused to let him buy a mastiff-and, although Hound was large enough, he didn't have at all the temperament of his namesake.

Once I'd pointed out to Uncle Albert that the Great Man hadn't owned a dog and had, on occasions, employed a tracking dog called Toby, who was an ugly lop-eared mixture of spaniel and Labrador. Uncle had become frosty and Hound had looked sad. He wasn't actually the kind of dog who carries the burglar's torch—he was too lazy even for that.

"Uncle," I said firmly. "Not too much reading after tea. Remember, you're giving a party; the guests will start arriving about seven."

Uncle mumbled crossly, but I knew that he actually liked parties. It gave him a chance to quote The Master and recall a few occasions when he himself—in his humble way, as he put it—had made some startling discoveries and deductions.

"You're giving the party for me," I reminded him. "My nineteenth birthday party—although I'm not actually nineteen until the week after next. Roger and his wife will be coming from London. They'll be staying the weekend, and John Canning will be here for the night."

"Where's he coming from?"

"Six miles away, but you asked him when you met him last May. You said he was an unusually sensitive and perceptive young man."

"Oh, yes. I remember the boy. Reads The Master and congratulated me on some of my own achievements. Who else is coming?"

"Don's driving down from London with his sister and various others."

"Long-haired layabout."

"He's not a layabout; he works at the BBC."

Uncle Albert muttered something about Lord Reith and inquired whether they were all staying the night.

"They'll drive back to London after it's over," I told him.

"So few people," he said mournfully.

"I thought *you'd* asked some guests as well."

"The vicar and his wife and Dr. Spence and the Paynes and Mrs. Caxton, but they won't stay long after dinner. Oh, yes, and an author fellow I met last weekend—he lent me one of his books—I can't say I think much of it, but he seems a decent chap. Quite young too.

"I've got your mother's jewelry in the safe—you will wear some of it, won't you? I remember when your mother wore it at her parties."

He'd said the same at my last birthday party and the one before and the one before that. Then, as now, I agreed.

"I'll get it out now," he said, and I followed him through the connecting door to his study—an indescribably untidy room, since Mrs. Hubbard was allowed to do no more than vacuum the carpet. The safe was large, solid-looking, and very old. Uncle Albert started spinning dials. Usually he supported himself on the top while he did so, but on this occasion he kept well clear, with his left hand behind his back.

"Is it that dirty?" I asked him.

He hesitated. "Not dirty exactly," he said gruffly and I went forward to investigate. "Don't touch the door!"

I looked carefully at the safe door. "It's shinier," I said. "What have you done to it?"

"I suppose I might as well tell you. In fact, I'm rather proud of the idea. It's covered with a special fine grease. For fingerprints," he explained. "Of course, there are burglar alarms at the windows and doors and there's Hound, but someone might gain admittance by day when the alarms are off."

I recalled that they had been, at one time, left on by day—until one memorable occasion when the vicar, waiting for my uncle in the drawing room and presumably stifled by the heat, had flung open the French windows—and all hell had broken loose. Mrs. Hubbard, relating the event, said that even Hound had entered into the spirit of the thing, and fascinated villagers had seen the vicar running down the main street with his hands clapped to his ears and his bony legs clearly visible through the rips in his cassock.

The safe was filled with envelopes and packages—rare first editions and what Uncle referred to as "memorabilia and ephemera." My jewelry was in a strong cardboard box on the top shelf. Normally, covered with oceans of sealing wax, it was held at the bank. Only for my birthday was it brought to this temporary home. As usual I chose to wear a small diamond pendant and, also as usual, I refused to bedeck myself with various rings and bracelets or to take the box back to London to "bring an aura of gracious living," as he put it, into my bed-sitter.

I had referred to my "birthday party" because that's how Uncle Albert

thought of it, but it was really his evening. Some of his cronies, some of my more respectable friends—the others couldn't afford the fare or petrol from London—came in for a few drinks, dinner, and the birthday cake. Then, after a decent interval for coffee and recovery, the older guests would depart and Uncle would take himself off to the study and, as he said, "Leave the young people to enjoy themselves." Not surprisingly, the proceedings which followed lost spontaneity.

I was dutifully dressed, wearing the pendant, and downstairs by six-thirty. Roger and Jane arrived a few minutes later. Roger's father had been a friend of my father's; they were in their late thirties but determined to be young or, as Roger said, "with it." Jane was small and slim, but Roger's spread was definitely middle-aged. I had a standing invitation to visit them in London and felt rather guilty that I so rarely did. Roger's publishing house was reputedly going through a difficult time. Soon after they joined me in the drawing room for a drink, a tap on the door revealed John Canning. Apparently he had arrived when I was changing and had been shown to his room by Batty Annie, who came from the village to help Mrs. Hubbard on special occasions.

I had only met John Canning twice before, and he didn't improve with the third meeting. He had impressed Uncle Albert with his knowledge of Sherlock Holmes and, when he heard that Roger was a publisher, he launched into the Meaning and Significance of the Modern Novel and the particular significance of Roger's publications.

Roger was puffing up nicely when Batty Annie flung open the door and let in the vicar and Mrs. Vicar and Mr. and Mrs. Payne. The Paynes were in their seventies; they had known my mother when she was a child and I was very fond of them. I couldn't say the same of Mrs. Caxton, who followed them in. She was a predatory forty-fiver, a widow whose target, I felt sure, was Uncle Albert. I didn't think she'd have any luck, noticing that when he joined the throng he had the wary look he usually has when she's around.

Dr. Spence arrived next, as untidy as usual, with his neat sparrow wife. I wondered where Don had got to, and then Batty Annie brought in Uncle Albert's author—who turned out to be Simon Lantern—and I rather forgot about Don. I could see John Canning bestowing himself on one group after another and, during lulls in the conversation, I heard him discussing heart surgery with Dr. Spence and God with the vicar. Predictably, he soon turned his attention on Simon.

"Mr. Lantern," he said. "You have given a new dimension to crime fiction."

Simon gave an enigmatic smile and I hoped the subject would change, because although, of course, I'd heard of the great Simon Lantern I'd never read any of his books. In fact, I don't like crime books, although it seems terribly disloyal to Uncle Albert to mention it.

I was saved by Batty Annie announcing dinner. She wasn't really mad—I should explain—but had acquired the adjective as a result of a passing interest in spiritualism.

Uncle Albert had the problem of rudeness to my friends from London if we started dinner without them and offending Mrs. Hubbard if we didn't. I assured him that Don's car had probably broken down and we certainly shouldn't wait.

Dinner was somewhat formal, with Uncle Albert at one end of the long table and myself at the other. I firmly put Simon on my right, the chair on my left was tacitly left empty for Don, and a block of four were left empty below Simon. It turned out they weren't all needed, because Don arrived soon after the soup with apologies—they *had* broken down—and with him were only his sister Susan and one other. Susan was wearing a scarlet blouse and purple slacks; I could see Uncle shuddering in the distance, but he should have seen the jeans she normally wore. With Susan was a new friend of hers named Sammy—I hadn't met him before, but Susan believed in variety. Sammy had a scrubbed look and I suspected that Susan had bathed him for the occasion; my suspicion was later confirmed when I passed to windward and was rewarded by the unmistakable smell of Pink Lilac talc.

"Only the three of you?" asked Uncle.

"Yes," said Don. "The other two fell out at the first roundabout."

There was a stunned silence, and I feebly explained that Don was joking. Nobody laughed.

Simon asked Don what kind of car he had and they immediately entered into the kind of dialogue which is common to males of all ages and races—I suspect it's what they beat out on African drums, and maybe those streams of little flags my naval friends refer to as "making signals" don't actually carry stirring messages about "England expecting" or instructions to "Form line of battle," but really read, "I'd just been passed by this Lotus Elan—"

Anyway, it gave me a chance to look around the table. Uncle Albert

was debating, as usual, with Dr. Spence. Mrs. Spence was chatting demurely with the vicar. Susan and Sammy were holding hands, which meant that Susan had to hold the soup spoon in her left hand. And John Canning was using what he thought was charm on Mrs. Caxton, who was smiling and nodding. He certainly worked hard. Jane was working hard too, conversing with Sammy, but whereas I thought John Canning had ulterior motives I knew that Jane was just pursuing her affection for, and hopeful affinity with, the young.

The car conversation seemed to have petered out, or maybe Don and Simon had remembered whose party it was. "So how are you, Frankie?" asked Don.

I hoped Uncle hadn't heard—and I loathed it too. "I'm fine, thank you, Donnie."

I was happy to see that he winced slightly.

Dinner proceeded smoothly with Mrs. Hubbard, as always, giving of her best. Her crowning effort was the birthday cake. The lights were turned out as she brought it in, firing on all nineteen candles, and put it in front of me with a large cake knife. Uncle Albert always insisted on champagne for my birthday dinner and, as the candles flickered, I began to wonder if I had let my glass be filled rather too often.

I stood up and thanked Uncle and Mrs. Hubbard before starting to blow at the flames and it was while I was leaning forward, puffing, that someone remarked on the beauty of the pendant—I couldn't tell who it was in the dark. I heard a murmur of assent, and by the time the candles were out and the lights back on, Uncle Albert was holding forth about the beauty of my mother's jewelry and my inexplicable behavior in refusing to take it to London and wear it. There were assents and reminiscences from the older members of the party and a tactful silence from the younger until Sammy, whom I had thought incapable of conversation, suddenly said that he thought I was right; that the trappings of wealth were no longer acceptable.

He didn't actually say, "Come the Revolution," but I could see Uncle Albert heating up—he has a low boiling point—and then Simon Lantern was coming to my rescue by pointing out the responsibility involved with valuable jewelry and the risk of theft. Someone mentioned the recent loss of a film star's emeralds and soon the conversation had generalized into talk of burglaries in general and of jewelry in particular, with Uncle quoting The Master's cases at appropriate moments.

Uncle Albert had a hankering for the port-and-nuts-for-the-boys segregation but I had talked him out of it the preceding year, so after we had finished the cake we all trooped into the drawing room for coffee.

By about ten the locals started to leave—but not, I was happy to see, Simon Lantern.

At 10:30, Uncle Albert retired to his study and the rest of us sat around talking—except for Susan and Sammy, who sat on the sofa still holding hands and apparently oblivious of all but each other. It was when Don got into a political argument with Jane and Roger—with John Canning agreeing with both sides—that Simon said, “You haven’t read any of my books, have you?” I admitted that I hadn’t and apologized for the fact that I never read crime fiction. “There’s one I think you would like,” he told me. “May I send you a copy?”

I said I’d be delighted and he wrote down my London address, adding, as an afterthought, that perhaps I could dine with him the next time he visited his publisher and he could give me the book in person.

He was an undeniably attractive man—mid-forties, I thought, with black hair greying at the temples. It occurred to me that perhaps I should keep the diamond pendant, because I was sure he’d take me to dine at that sort of place. While I was telling him that I’d like that, I thought how part of his charm lay in the way he actually listened when people were speaking, his head held slightly on one side.

When the telephone rang about 11:30, I didn’t bother to answer it because I knew that Uncle Albert had an extension in the study and would deal with it there. It was a call for Simon, and Uncle invited him to take it in the study. Don took advantage of his absence to remark unkindly on him and suggest that he practiced his air of attentive listening in the mirror each morning.

Simon wasn’t long on the phone. We heard him speaking to Uncle Albert and Uncle saying, “Nonsense, my boy, no trouble at all,” then he returned to explain that the call was from his sister. All the lights had failed and the electricity people had told her it was a cable fault that couldn’t be mended until the following day. She was going to spend the night in the nearest hotel and advised him to do likewise but Uncle Albert had pressed him to stay the night here.

I thought his sister was taking rather drastic action but I only said that I had no idea he had a sister and asked why he hadn’t brought her to the party. He replied that his sister wasn’t good at parties, whereupon Don

gave a baleful look at Susan and Sammy and said, "Nor's mine."

Around midnight Don said they'd better start back. It was a warm night and we all went out to wave them goodbye.

It was a dead loss, waving goodbye, because the car wouldn't start, and although Don and Simon both poked around under the bonnet it appeared that the problem couldn't be repaired without spares from the local garage. That meant three more besides John Canning, Roger, and Jane staying the night.

Proprieties had to be observed and Don and Sammy were given a twin-bedded room, Susan a smallish single room down the corridor. Uncle Albert doled out toothbrushes and pajamas, and I gave Susan a nightdress. Uncle Albert then took the reluctant Hound for a short walk while I busied myself with sheets and towels and offers of help in making beds.

While I was thus skivvying, I heard Uncle return and the clanking of bolts as he locked up for the night. He always locked the doors from the passage to the drawing room and study and took the respective keys to bed with him. When I heard his footsteps on the stairs, I left Don to finish making his own bed. Uncle Albert has some old-fashioned ideas, and I hate to shock him unnecessarily.

My bedroom was in the middle of the corridor and there was a certain amount of traffic during the night which I took to be guests en route to the bathroom or Sammy en route to Susan. I didn't sleep particularly well and sometime in the early hours I remembered that I should have given the pendant to Uncle Albert so he could lock it away in the safe. Instead, I had left it on the dressing table by the window. Remembering the tales of robbery earlier in the evening, I got up and actually leaned out of the window to check for drainpipes and other furtive access to my room but I couldn't see anything that would help a would-be thief. My room overlooked the drive and I peered anxiously at the trees which flanked it but I didn't see any suspicious shadows. I could hear owls hooting sadly and, somewhere to the front of the house, a faint hissing. For a moment I thought it was rain; then I remembered the Speckled Band Uncle Albert had insisted I read about in my early youth—but neither seemed applicable, so I went back to bed and, finally, to sleep.

When I woke, it was half-past nine and there was a lot of noise outside my window. I looked out and saw Don and the man from the local garage peering into the guts of Don's car while Simon sat in the driver's seat

using the starter when requested. The car burst into noisy life for brief periods while the garage man poked about with an enormous screwdriver and Don watched anxiously.

I had a quick bath and dressed. My final look at the scene outside showed Don at the wheel—and no sign of Simon. I hoped he hadn't left.

I was halfway down the stairs when I saw Uncle Albert at the open study door.

"Frances," he called to me, and I followed him in. Simon was there. "I said I'd show Mr. Lantern some of my treasures," Uncle told me darkly, "and when I opened the safe, I found that all your jewelry is missing. We've had a burglary."

I wasn't particularly upset for myself. I seldom wore it and had no doubt that it was well insured. But Uncle Albert was very unhappy.

"Come and see this, Frances," he said, and Simon and I followed him to the drawing room.

The French windows were open—apparently Mrs. Hubbard had assumed that Uncle had opened them before she cleaned the room, since the alarm seemed to be switched off. "However," said Uncle, brightening visibly now that he could start deducting, "the alarm was *not* switched off, someone disconnected it. And look there"—he pointed to the earth outside the window, which bore strange marks, fairly deep and spade-shaped—"you will remember," he said, "how in 'The Adventure of the Priory School' The Master realized the cow hoofprints were actually made by horses?"

Simon said he remembered it well.

"I deduce that those prints were made by a man walking on his toes."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," he explained, "it would give less guidance to the man's size of shoe than would a full footprint. You can see the tracks he made coming in—and going out."

"So," I said with some relief, "it could have been any thief for miles around."

"I'm afraid not, Frances. I told you the alarm on this window had been disconnected. That could only be done from inside the room. And it was done yesterday, because I tested the alarm on Thursday evening when I brought your jewelry home from the bank."

"Anyone could have come in yesterday. The windows were open and we were out on the grounds. We wouldn't have seen anything."



"One thing we do know from the size of those footprints is that the robber returned to force open the French doors after it started to rain: the ground was very wet, which made the prints wide and deep."

"But," said Simon, "it didn't rain last night—or, if it did, it was a very light shower. I've been out in front trying to help Don with his car, and the ground's bone dry."

"Have you called the police?" I asked Uncle Albert.

He looked hurt. Simon persuaded me to do so. I've called the C.I.D. at Midhampton. I think I'll just go and have a quick look outside before they arrive. They have to travel sixteen miles." He scooted through the open French windows, more or less avoiding the footprints, and disappeared behind some nearby bushes. He didn't ask Simon to go with him; maybe he just didn't see him as an obedient Watson.

We saw Uncle Albert emerge from the bushes holding something white, and as he came back through the windows we could see it was a pair of gloves.

"Look," he said proudly. "The fingers of the right glove are covered with grease. The burglar was left-handed. The left glove is quite clean and is obviously the one that came in contact with the dial." He turned to Simon. "Who else aside from you is left-handed?" he asked.

Simon looked surprised. "I'm right-handed," he said.

Uncle was disappointed. "You picked up the telephone receiver with your left hand last night."

"I'm deaf in my right ear," Simon told him.

Uncle turned to me. "Your friend Susan," he said. "She held her soup spoon in her left hand at dinner."

I explained that Sammy had been holding her right one, and Uncle tutted a bit. "Anyway," I pointed out, "who's to say it's one of us? There are probably hundreds of left-handed burglars in the county."

A local bobby arrived at that moment. P.C. Brown was a keen gardener and, after one look at the footprints, opined that something funny had been going on, because it hadn't rained for three weeks and if someone had been using a hose it was strictly illegal.

"Of course," I said. "The hissing noise last night—it was either the hose or the garden sprinkler!" I explained why I'd been looking out of the window and Uncle Albert beamed at me.

"Excellent," he told me.

Don came in at that moment to say goodbye and P.C. Brown explained that Don and his party must wait for the Inspector from Midhampton. Uncle told Don about the burglary. P.C. Brown frowned at Uncle and Don swore. Reluctantly, the P.C. allowed him to telephone his excuses to London.

"Who else is staying in the house," Mr. Brown asked us afterward, "and where are they?"

Don had seen Roger and Jane heading toward the village, Sammy and Susan were packing—packing what? I wondered—and nobody had seen John Canning. "His car's still outside," offered Don.

P.C. Brown could never have played poker. Over his face there flitted the go-seek-and-round-up-suspects look, closely followed by a baleful stare at Uncle laced with the obvious thought—based perhaps on previous experience—that if he left the room Uncle would be off clue-hunting and Midhampton would be very displeased with the results. To his evident relief, Midhampton itself showed up at this point. The party consisted of a rather elderly and cynical Inspector, a sergeant who reminded me of a vicious terrier I'd once had, and a horde of experts who proceeded to search the grounds, take photographs, make casts of the footprints, and dust surfaces with grey powder.

The Inspector turned to Uncle Albert. "Have you found any evidence?" he asked in a sad voice. Evidently Uncle's fame *had* spread. Uncle pointed out the footprints outside the French windows. The Inspector peered out, looked for rather a long time at those on the periphery, and opined that Mr. Holmes would have used a mat.

A convert!

Uncle beamed. He realized he couldn't always be as perfect as The Master. With a flourish he produced the white cotton gloves. The sergeant yapped, whipped a polythene bag out of his case, and dropped them in.

P.C. Brown, who was being upstaged, told the Inspector of the hissing noise I'd heard in the night.

"Not the Speckled Band," I interrupted and got a half smile from the Inspector and a rather hurt look from P.C. Brown, who battled on and was then sent to round up those of the party who could be located. The sergeant left with him and Mrs. Hubbard appeared with coffee and biscuits, followed by the still-clasped Sammy and Susan, who sat together on the sofa.

We all heard a sharp yelp through the French windows. It wasn't the

call of Hound. I suspected it was the terrier-sergeant hot on the trail. The Inspector departed in its direction and Uncle Albert said he must wash his hands. He reappeared some ten minutes later with a smug expression, a pair of binoculars, and Hound.

He hadn't been able to observe much from the downstairs loo—cloakroom, as he insists on calling it—even with the binoculars, because the window glass is opaque and the window is small and high, but he'd had a good view of the sergeant's back and heard him refer to faint scuffmarks at the foot of the drainpipe and yelp a second time when he spied some threads of material caught partway up the pipe.

A man had been dispatched for a ladder and Uncle had had to step away so that the climber wouldn't see him.

"It's definitely an inside job," he said. "Someone in the house climbed down the drainpipe after everyone was asleep, forced open the French windows—having earlier disconnected the burglar alarm—opened the safe, took the jewelry, and climbed back up the drainpipe to his room."

"Clasping the jewelry," I asked, "until such time as the police would arrive to take it from him?"

"He may have had an accomplice on the grounds," said Uncle, "or he may have concealed it in the house. In 'The Naval Treaty'—"

Jane and Roger came in at that point and Jane, wearing a well cut trouser suit which had Uncle tutting under his breath, helped herself and Roger to coffee. Uncle brought them up to date on the facts and on his deductions. Midway through his dissertation John Canning came in and explained that he'd been reading in his room until the police had turned him out to conduct their search. I gave him a cup of coffee.

Uncle moved to the window, his binoculars in hand.

"They've found something!" he said.

And Hound, who'd been lying peacefully on Sammy and Susan, obeyed some atavistic call, leaped to his feet, bounded through the windows, and was off at a speed I'd never credited him with. I could see that Uncle was as surprised as I was, but he was very loyal.

"They've found something!" he repeated. "They're holding it up—some sort of bundle—and Hound—yes, Hound's got the scent!"

I suppose I was the only other person in the room who knew that Hound could no more follow a scent than I could fly to the moon. Uncle retained his optimism.

"Yes," he cried, "and now he's coming back here!"

Hound came bounding back and sank, panting and exhausted, at Uncle's feet.

A few minutes later, the Inspector came in with a rolled-up bundle tied with garden twine. From it he drew a pair of loud check trousers. I'd always thought they were hideous since the day Uncle bought them.

"These are yours also?" asked the Inspector, holding up a pair of overshoes. "And the gardening gloves?"

"Yes," admitted my uncle. "I keep them in the garden room for when I do the garden."

"The garden room," I explained, "is the one with the cracked sink and the broken lawnmower next to the—the cloakroom."

"And the room is not locked?"

My uncle looked sad and shook his head.

"I assume," he said, "that the thief wore my clothing to protect his own whilst climbing up and down the drainpipe—and then threw it out of the landing window."

"It would be one hell of a throw," I pointed out.

"Yes," agreed the Inspector. "It seems more likely that your uncle's clothes were hidden in the bushes sometime later, possibly early this morning."

"And why the hose?" I persisted.

"You will remember," said Uncle Albert, "that The Master could calculate the weight and possibly the height of a man from his footprints, but a man standing on very wet ground in someone else's overshoes—" A faraway look came into his eyes and I knew he was on the track—or, as he would have said, "deducting."

I tried to pull him back to the present. "Surely it would have been even more difficult if the ground had been bone dry."

Uncle responded with a proud smile. "I always keep that patch of ground slightly wet," he said. "Damp enough to hold footprints in the event of a burglary."

I saw Don looking at Uncle Albert and then at me. Well, I'm not the only person in the world with an eccentric relation.

"It's very interesting," said Don. "But may I ask when we shall be allowed to leave, Inspector?"

"You're all free to go now" was the answer.

Don galvanized Susan and Sammy and then his car into action. In minutes, they were speeding dangerously down the drive. Then John

Canning made his polite departure, followed by Simon Lantern.

Our weekend guests, Jane and Roger, remained.

The Inspector agreed to join us for a pre-lunch drink. Uncle Albert looked portentous and frustrated until both Jane and Roger decided to tidy up before lunch. As the door closed behind them, Uncle launched into his theory.

"Of course it was them," he said. "Very sad, but Roger's firm is in need of money and the jewelry would fetch a very good price." He shook his head sadly and continued. "They are both familiar with the house. They knew where I kept my gardening clothes and where the hose was. They went out for a walk quite early, hiding my clothes in the bushes on the way. They're great walkers so no one would remark on the fact that they strode out to the village. No doubt they met an accomplice there. Of course it was Jane who came down the drainpipe—Roger's a little stout for a maneuver of that sort—and she had to make the ground really wet to disguise her lack of weight and inches. It all fits," he added. "And I hope that you will be able to apprehend them and trace the jewelry before the accomplice sells it."

He said it with a look which would have made Lestrade quail, but it didn't have that effect on the Inspector.

"We certainly hope to recover the jewelry," he said. "My men are watching the thief at this moment and they will see when he makes contact with his accomplice. In fact, we pretty well know who that will be, because he usually works with the same man."

"Usually?" My uncle was shocked. "You mean this isn't their first offense?"

"It won't be the thief's first offense—but the thief is neither of your two friends."

"I'm glad of that," I said with feeling, "but who is it?"

"I'll tell you that as soon as we're able to make the arrest," the Inspector promised.

It was a sticky weekend, with Uncle having to admit failure to himself and pretending like mad he'd never suspected Jane and Roger—who didn't make the situation any easier by constantly asking Uncle for his opinion on the theft. It was quite a relief when they left on Sunday afternoon, and even more pleasant when the Inspector rang in the evening and asked if he could call around. I'd refused a lift from Jane and Roger

and decided to stay over and take an early train in the morning in case there was any news.

The Inspector brought my jewelry along for formal identification.

"Who was it?" I asked.

"Mr. Canning."

"How did you know?" Uncle asked.

"It was quite simple. Canning had several convictions under other names and it was his style. He fit the general description. His fingerprints clinched it. Of course, the fact that he is a jewel thief didn't prove he'd stolen Miss Stephen's jewelry—we had to wait until he collected it from his accomplice."

"But how could you know?" I asked. "How could you know his style, what he looked like, who his accomplice was?"

"I didn't need to, Miss Stephen. Scotland Yard has a fine Criminal Records Office. A man with a police radio has a great advantage over a man with a magnifying glass."

Uncle Albert was very unhappy in the hours that followed the Inspector's departure and I was considering phoning the office in the morning to say my uncle was ill when he suddenly perked up.

"It was entirely solved by the fingerprints," he said. "Entirely. And, of course, The Master was one of the very first to realize their importance."

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*The millionaire's son had disappeared many years ago . . .*



It was no news to anyone—except the cops—that on the night in question Frenchy smoked a young Jersey mobster who drew first when he got caught with six cards in his duke—which is considered most unorthodox among practitioners of five-card stud.

Frenchy didn't realize that the Jersey player only had a busted flush, even with the six cards, when he called him. He was sorry he had to ventilate the Jersey player, who was young, like himself—and, what was

worse, still had eighteen hundred potatoes in his jeans to lose.

Frenchy didn't wait around to explain this unfortunate happenstance to the gendarmes, since he felt sure no cop would have the good sense to listen to his side. Besides, he expected reciprocal heat from the Jersey side. The baffled police later came up with a Death by Natural Causes ticket.

Frenchy was a native of Montreal and spoke French as well as he spoke English. He was of medium height and weight and had medium brown hair, but he had a face that attracted better-than-medium-type women. He was an orphan who'd once said that he'd trade a year's good poker luck to have had a family of his own.

In the early morning after the poker blast, Frenchy hopped on a boat as it pulled away from the Fulton Street pier.

The captain said, "Welcome aboard. We're just leaving for Newfoundland and we can use another hand. When the cod start running, it's all we can do to keep up with the cleaning."

"All right," Frenchy said. "I'll go to Newfoundland, but I don't want any cod for myself—except maybe on Friday. But I'd like to see how it's done. I may decide to take it up myself. I'll just go along for the ride and pay the same fare as everybody else."

As the boat was already out on the river and it was probably against the ecology laws to throw him overboard, the captain said, "If you want to eat, you must work like the rest. You'll like my fish soup."

They didn't catch many fish before they got to Newfoundland, but they caught enough so that Frenchy learned the fishing industry wasn't his bag. In fact, he swore that separating fish guts was strictly for the gulls, who seemed to do it with a great deal of relish. He also got tired of the fish soup, which was on the menu three times a day.

When they were east of Newfoundland, Frenchy asked the captain about a beautiful low-lying island.

"That's Bird Island," the captain said. "It's owned by Pierre Roget, who lives there. Many years ago Pierre struck oil back in Edmonton and became a millionaire."

"Why does he live on the island?"

"He married, and his new wife couldn't stand the smell of oil wells, so he brought her to Bird Island where the sea air is good and there are no oil wells, only fishing and farming."



"I think she made a sucker bet," Frenchy said. "I'd rather smell an old oil well any day, because you know that's as bad as it's going to get. But old fish get ripier all the time."

He peered at the landscape. "What's that big stone building?" he asked. "It looks like some kind of a fort from the old days."

"No, that's Pierre Roget's manor. He built it to cheer up his wife. She had a son many years ago—a wild one. When little Jean was only eight he rowed out in a dory and was never seen again. Pierre took it bad, but Madame Roget never recovered. They never had any more children. She still dresses in black and it's said she spends most of her time in the chapel praying that little Jean is still alive and will come back to her someday."

Frenchy considered. The island would be a very nice place for a vacation from fish guts and the fish soup. "I don't think I'll go into the cod business after all," he told the captain. "Let me off here. I'll stay a short while, and you can pick me up on your way back."

"We'll miss you," the captain said. "You did a first-class job chucking the fish guts overboard once you learned not to throw them into the wind. But I must warn you, they eat only fish on the island too—except for an occasional crab or lobster now and then."

When they put him ashore, Frenchy looked around the pier and asked an old geezer if the island had a lawyer. If there were any games or scams going on a lawyer would be sure to know about them.

The old geezer was scraping the bottom of a boat. He looked up, scratched himself, spat some tobacco juice at a bait can, and said, "Lawyer? Why do you want a lawyer? You only been here three minutes and already you want to sue us! I advise against it—and that's the only free advice you'll get on this island. If you sue, the only winner will be old Skrim. He's the local shyster. You'll find his office across from the pier. But if I am you, sonny, I will keep my mitts in my pockets while talking to Skrim."

Frenchy thanked the old geezer and walked along the pier to the lawyer's office.

"Glad to see you," the shyster said. "I'm Cyrus Skrim. What can I do for you?"

"I'm Henri Dubois, but I answer faster to Frenchy. Tell me, Cyrus, where do you go when there's a tidal wave on such a little bitty island?"

"I see you're new on our beautiful strand," Skrim countered. "Will you be staying for the boating and fishing?"

"I'd like to look around a while and see what kind of game plan you have here. I'm a sporting man."

"I'm afraid there's no gambling on Bird Island."

"Not even a race track?"

"No, but I can represent you if you'd like to build one. Of course, we have a population of only one hundred and eighty-two, and nine plow-horses—which might present a problem. However, we do have a croquet tournament every summer where a few side bets are tolerated. Only last summer Jed Groper won a bushel of crabapples, which his wife spiced. May I suggest a fish cannery, Mr. Dubois? Or perhaps a nice bit of farmland?" The shyster rubbed his hands together. "Ben Pickelberry's mule started sitting down last spring and won't get up to pull the plow any more. Ben sees no way out but to sell. You can make a good deal and I can get Ben to throw in the mule."

"I don't think I'd make a good farmer," Frenchy said.

Skrim studied him. "What kind of business are you interested in?"

Frenchy observed the sly look on Skrim's face. "I'm ready for any hand you deal," he said. "I'm twenty-two and I'm a gambler. I left the States ahead of the homicide squad and I've packed a rod since I was eighteen. I cooled a poker player who couldn't count to five. This information should save us a week of sparring. As client to lawyer, this knowledge is confidential."

"Why tell me at all?"

"Because you have something wrinkling the front of your brain. I've told you about me, so you tell me the table stake you have in mind, without any more fencing."

"I'd like to do a blessed deed for a bereaved family," Skrim said, then proceeded to tell Frenchy the same tale the captain had told him about the Rogets.

"Pierre promised me ten thousand dollars," the shyster concluded, "if I could get information that would return Jean to his mother. With a little patching, there's no reason you couldn't be Jean."

"That's very nice," Frenchy said, "but I don't think I could walk in and say, 'Here I am, *maman*. I am Jean. Give Skrim the ten grand.' No, life tells me it's got to be harder than that. So far all you've got is a four-card flush."

Skrim coughed. "First of all, I'm not after ten thousand. I'm after a hundred thousand, and it's easier than splitting a salmon. I've been inside the manor many times on business with Pierre. He has an office safe where I've seen what must be more than a hundred thousand dollars in cash. The safe is always open in the daytime. No one on the island ever locks his door. But even if the safe were closed, it's the kind of breadbox you could open with a butter knife."

"I accept your arithmetic," Frenchy said, "but what makes you think a total stranger can walk into the hive in broad daylight and walk out with the honeycomb? There must be a million guys in Canada who are twenty-two."

"When I was only a short order," Skrim said, "I lived in Halifax. My father was a tattoo artist and taught me his trade. I worked my way through law school on the waterfront putting dragons, twining hearts, and sexy ladies on deepwater salts. I even did a few girls who had different ideas about where tattoos would do the most good."

He turned his eyes to the window. "Jean had a strawberry birthmark behind his left earlobe. You look enough like him to pass after all these years. Growing up changes people."

Frenchy's eyes widened. "Can you tattoo me with something that'll wash off? I don't know if I want to go around forever with a strawberry mark on my neck. I'm sure you do a fine job, but the cops will be looking for a joe with a strawberry. It would be like a card mechanic wearing spare aces in his hatband."

"As long as you stay south of the border no one will connect you with the theft. As for the inconvenience, your share of the profit should soften the pain and may even buy a laser-removal job." Skrim rubbed his jaw. "I can tell you all you need to know about the island and the family. I even drew up the Rogets' wills. You'll have enough information to keep you afloat."

"How long do you think I'll have before Madame Roget starts to nose a bad oyster in the stew?"

"It should only take a few days for you to look around, open the box, grab the money, and get out. I'll have my cruiser ready to take you to Halifax. From there you can catch a flight to the States." Skrim walked around his desk and sat down.

"I'll square my end," he said. "The strawberry mark will be so good I may even insist on the other ten thousand."

He looked hard at Frenchy. "As for the split, I'm the brain and the tattoo artist. I will also supply the boat you'll live on for the next ten days while the tattoo heals. So it will be more than fair if I take sixty percent—that's not including the ten thousand from Pierre. That was always mine."

"A fifty-fifty split would be nicer," Frenchy said, "but I see your point. Deal me in and I'll play the hand for you."

Skrim gave Frenchy the strawberry and sent him out on the cruiser. He headquartered at Badger Bay on the mainland, where they'd heard about steaks and chops.

He spent the time sunning and cruising, and he came back in nine days, healed and suntanned.

Skrim examined the strawberry. "It'll fool the Rogets, and even a bumblebee, if necessary. I think if you went to a strawberry festival you'd be picking forks out of your neck." He went to the phone and called the manor.

"I have a party here in my office who claims his name is Jean Roget," he said.

Twenty minutes later the Roget launch circle-swept into the pier in a high spray. The boathand helped Madame Roget and Pierre off the craft. They walked arm in arm to Skrim's office. Madame Roget's face was wet with tears under the black veil. She was a worn-looking forty-eight, her eyes sad and lined. Pierre Roget was fiftyish, on the heavy side, and had a pleasant enough face. He held onto her as if he was afraid she would vanish.

Frenchy was trim and handsome. Madame looked at him and tried to smile.

"Jean?" she asked.

"*Oui, maman*," Frenchy said.

"Are you well? Where have you been?"

"I rowed the dory onto a rock and it sank. I was picked up by a ship and taken to New York."

She walked around him, looked at his neck, and began to sob.

"Jean!"

They grabbed each other and Frenchy said softly, "I'm home, *maman*."

Pierre was overwhelmed and offered many thanks to Skrim. The lawyer

broke out a bottle of wine and there were toasts. *Maman* wept into her burgundy until it looked like she was drinking pink chablis.

A month went by.

One day Frenchy buffered the Roget launch into the pier. He walked into Skrim's office with a big smile on his face. "You've made me a very happy man," he said.

"Where have you been?" Skrim snarled. "Do you have the money?"

"No, but I have good news for you. Papa sends you this check for ten thousand dollars and says to thank you no end. It's your fee for finding me."

"Fee, shmee. Where's the bundle?"

"It's in the safe," Frenchy said, "and it's nearer to a quarter of a million. And the safe is open all day, just like you said. But I can't steal from Papa. I am very grateful to you but I love my parents and I would never spoil it, not for a *million* dollars."

"So you think you can grab it all for yourself?" the lawyer screamed. "I'll show you! I'll not only show you, but I'll show you up for the creep you are!"

"Take it easy," Frenchy said with a smile. "Think about it for a minute. If I'd failed, you'd wind up with zero for your trouble. This way you get ten grand and my eternal gratitude. I only want to bring them some happiness—"

"Bring them some happiness!" Skrim shouted. "You can't do this to me! I'll expose you for the tinhorn murderer you are!"

Frenchy's smile faded. "You shouldn't have said that." He walked over to Skrim, grabbed him by his tie, and dragged him up out of his chair. Pulling a gun from his pocket he jammed the muzzle into Skrim's neck. "They must never know, you hear?" he said. "You'll either take the ten grand or I won't leave enough of you for a wake. Make up your mind. *Maman* is waiting for fresh fish for the soup."

Skrim's eyes were popping. "Let me go! I'll take the check! Get the gun out of my neck!"

"Say thank you," Frenchy said.

"Thank you! Now put that gun back in your pocket before someone sees it."

Frenchy returned Skrim to his chair and holstered the piece.

"My name is Jean Roget—*Jean Roget*—and you'd better not forget it

for as long as you live, because you'll only live as long as you remember it."

"You're going too far," Skrim said. "You haven't a prayer of getting away with it. I should have done it my way. Jean was old enough to remember the plush cocoon he came from. Sooner or later he'll come back to get what's his—and then you'll get yours."

"I don't think so," Frenchy said. "Remember the Jersey player I cooled in that poker game I told you about? He had a strawberry birthmark behind his left ear."



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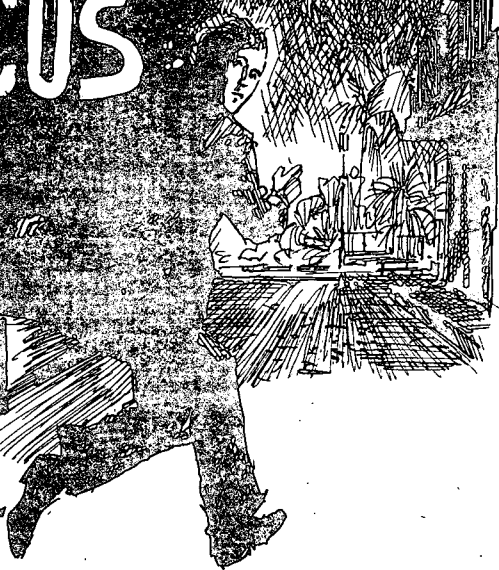
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HO1244

*Carlos Bannon wasn't licensed to operate on the island . . .*

# WHITE HIBISCUS

by  
KENNETH  
GAVRELL



We came down out of the clouds and suddenly there was the island spread beneath us, vivid greens and dark browns, high mountains rising from a turquoise sea, and the city we were approaching looking curiously lonely amid all that natural beauty. There was a shower over the city. Several people had told me that the island resembled my own Puerto Rico of twenty years ago, before the supermarkets, superhighways and superprices came along to advertise our progress. I'd soon find out.

By the time we landed, the shower had moved out to sea and the sun was shining. They herded us across a short stretch of puddled runway into the customs and immigration office. A burly uniformed guard stood at each door. A young black man behind the desk checked my passport hurriedly but efficiently; he asked how long I was staying and the purpose of my visit. I told him I was a tourist. He stamped the passport and smiled me toward the door opposite that which I'd entered. Signs in French and English along the corridor directed me toward the baggage area. There was no sign of Dr. Martinez. I supposed he'd be waiting for me outside the baggage area.

My battered brown bag was already on the belt and I pulled it off and headed for another uniformed guard at the exit doors. A pretty black girl just inside the doors checked my baggage claim number before I was allowed out.

The glass doors were painted over in misty grey to match the airport walls, so I was a bit shocked by the sudden bright light, the noise, and the crowd as I went through. It was another world: dark-skinned women in bandannas and colorful skirts, a lot of running, shouting kids, smiling men in rolled-up shirtsleeves, and a small group of straw-hatted musicians playing an Afro-Latin beat to give the tourists the right first impression. There were very few white faces, so it was no problem to pick out that of Dr. Martinez.

He pumped my hand and guided me politely but firmly through the milling crowd toward the parking lot across the road.

"You arrived very quickly," he said.

"I had nothing important to detain me."

"How's the detecting business these days?"

"It's a living. I guess I like it."

He smiled beneath his heavy, greying moustache. "You probably wouldn't be happy doing anything else," he said.

His car was a small white Renault with a black stripe down the side—sportier than I would have expected from a quiet fifty-year-old art dealer. We pulled out of the parking lot and started down a two-lane highway along the rocky seashore.

"Do you miss your job at the University?" I asked him.

"No," he said, "but I miss living in Puerto Rico. An art dealer makes a lot more money than an art professor."



"Is the money worth the political situation here?"

"I'm not much touched by the politics here," he said. "They mind their business and I mind mine."

"There seem to be guards everywhere."

I looked out at the swells smashing the steep rock walls beside us. We were already at the outskirts of town. And I was already tired of his not getting to the point.

"So, what's up?" I asked.

"Here," he said. "You can read this while I get you to your hotel. It's not far now."

He handed me a creased page from what appeared to be a local newspaper. It was in French. An article was boxed in black ink. "You do read French?" he said.

"More or less."

I settled back in the car seat to do some more-or-less mental translating.

#### DROWNING VICTIM IDENTIFIED

The body of a man washed ashore near Ste. Anne Friday has been identified as that of lawyer Louis Rouget, it was announced yesterday.

An official announcement disclosed that according to information given to the harbor police Sunday morning, an unidentified person had reportedly stowed away on board the vessel *La Mouette* bound for Florida.

The captain was ordered by radio to report whether any person not connected with the crew was aboard his vessel. The message added that the captain would be held personally responsible for the search. Soon afterward the captain reported that only the crew was on board. The harbor police then ordered the ship to put in at Ste. Anne. The Ste. Anne harbor police made a thorough search of the ship, but found no one except the crew.

The captain later confessed that Rouget had been aboard. He said he had put Rouget into the sea with a life belt near a small island south of Ste. Anne.

Following the discovery of Rouget's body Friday, Coroner Michel Bouchet left for Ste. Anne to investigate the cause of death.

Preliminary investigations by the Ste. Anne harbor police indicated that the captain and certain members of the crew might be guilty of manslaughter. Indications that the smuggling of marijuana was possibly being carried on by the ship were discovered by the harbor police. Furthermore, the captain of *La Mouette* had been sentenced to various prison terms in the past for smuggling and similar offenses.

"It seems a bit muddled to me," I said, "unless my French is worse than I thought."

"It's not what you would call a satisfying account," Martínez said. "Especially if Louis Rouget was a friend."

"A good friend?" I asked.

"Good enough."

"The paper is dated Sunday. You called me Monday. Today's Tuesday. Any new developments?"

"Nothing I've heard of."

"This isn't exactly my sort of thing," I said.

"Why not? You're a private detective."

"I'm not licensed here. I'm supposed to be visiting as a tourist. It'll be hard to operate."

"I didn't know who else to turn to," Martínez said, his voice showing real traces of emotion for the first time.

"All right," I said. "I'll give it a try."

"Here's your hotel," he said. "I hope you'll like it."

From the hotel balcony, halfway up the steep hill that climbed from the harbor, I had a view of a good part of the town. The harbor was almost exactly in the shape of a U, and geometric patterns of hot color rose from the sea on three sides. At the long quay floated the more sedate whites, blues, and blacks of anchored ships. The island was famous for its primitive, extremely colorful art, and you could see why by looking out from this balcony. No painter could resist such views.

"It's beautiful," I said.

He nodded. We were nursing straight white rum from the bottle I'd brought with me.

"It's about time for my questions."

"Let's sit down," he said.

I went in and brought two cane chairs out onto the balcony.

"For starters," I said, "why was your friend Rouget on that boat?"

"I don't know, but a very odd thing happened just the night before."

"I'm all ears."

"Louis was having a drink with me down at the harbor. In fact, we'd had several. Suddenly he said to me that if anything should happen to him—then he stopped dead. I pursued it, asked him what he had been meaning to say, but he clammed up completely. He was clearly afraid. When I persisted, he muttered something that sounded like 'white hibiscus.' He was a bit drunk, I'm afraid. I asked him to repeat the phrase, but he wouldn't. After that, he hardly talked until we left."

"Well, something did happen to him," I said, "and I suppose you've been checking on this 'white hibiscus.' What did you find?"

"Nothing. I thought it might be the name of a night club, a ship, a hotel—God knows what. But I'm not a detective. I went through the telephone book, I walked along the harbor, I tried the phrase on people I know. Nothing."

"Maybe he didn't say 'white hibiscus.'"

"Yes. But I don't know what else it could have been."

I got the bottle and poured us some more rum. Martinez seemed to be groping for words. "There was always something a bit—secretive—about Louis. Or so I thought. It's hard to explain. I had a vague feeling he was always holding something back."

"How long did you know him?"

"About three years."

"Was he married?"

"No. I suppose we became friends partly because he was a widower and I'm a bachelor and we were both lonely. Getting a bit on in years. Professionals. It's sometimes hard to find someone to talk to here."

"Did he run around with women?"

"Not that I know of."

"A lawyer can get into trouble with criminals."

"I know. But he never mentioned anything to me."

"He was trying to get off the island quickly and secretly," I said. "That's clear enough. He was afraid to buy a ticket on a boat or a plane. He took a big risk. Then someone found out what boat he was on. The captain should have apprehended him for the harbor police, but he didn't. He put Rouget into the sea near Ste. Anne—or so he says—supposedly

wearing a life belt. Why did he do that? He's been engaged in smuggling in the past. He may have been smuggling marijuana and was scared.

"The body was found presumably with no life belt. I'll have to check on that. The harbor police may have found signs of violence on the body. I'll also have to check on that. But if you murder a man, you don't just toss the body overboard without a weight so that it will be washed ashore. None of this makes much sense."

"That's why you're here," Martinez said tiredly.

"From the look of things, I may be here for a while. Where did Rouget live?"

"He had an apartment about five blocks from here. It was also his office."

"I'd like to see it."

"Is that your first step?" Martinez asked naively.

"No," I said. "My first step is to help you finish off this bottle of Palo Viejo."

The next morning at nine I was at the office of *La Lumière* newspaper. My French is poor, but between English and Spanish I managed to get the information I wanted. I had asked for the reporter who wrote the story of Rouget's drowning. They informed me that the whole story had been an official government release. No reporter had personally covered it, much less followed it up. Most of their "news" these days was simply government releases.

"Which agency of the government released this one?" I asked the tall man who had been told to assist me, since he spoke Spanish.

"They all come from the Government News Agency, but the information on this would have come from the National Police Office, I'd guess."

"Not the harbor police?"

"They're part of the National Police these days."

I thanked him and had him give me directions to National Police Headquarters. It was in the middle of town, just off the main square. I walked there. Once again there was a language problem, but eventually I found myself in the office of the major, who, I was told, had charge of the case.

I figured anyone with the rank of major who sat in an office would be too far removed from the gritty on-the-scene details to be of much use,

but I sat in his dingy waiting room and smoked until his secretary told me he was free to see me.

The inner office was small, grey, and cement-walled, with only two windows. The major's big black desk took up most of the floor space. Overhead a ceiling fan creaked lazily. There were ashes scattered carelessly on the desk and floor, and the wastebasket was piled high with crumpled paper.

The major was a uniformed man of about forty-five. He was fat and bald, and his skin glistened like ebony. He held a damp-looking white handkerchief in his left hand and I guessed he sweated a lot. He assumed a wide professional smile as I entered.

"Ah, sit down," he said hospitably, gesturing toward one of the rusting metal-and-plastic chairs that faced his desk.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm glad you speak English. My French is pretty rusty."

"Ha—rusty," he said. "I have never heard that word applied to language ability before. I shall have to write that down."

He pulled a ballpoint pen from his shirt pocket, slid over a white deskpad, and did just that.

"Now," he said. "Your name is Carlos Bannon. A strange name. Your father is American?"

"Yes."

"But you are from Puerto Rico, and you are interested for some reason in the Rouget case." He put his fingertips together and leaned back heavily in his imitation-leather chair. "I am Major Barrault, and I am in charge of that case. So I suppose I am the man to help you."

"Your English is very good," I said.

"You flatter me," he said, smiling. "However, I did study in the United States for four years. Why are you interested in this case, Mr. Bannon?"

"Mr. Rouget was a friend of a friend. He has asked me to look into it."

"And why you and not himself?"

"I suppose because I'm a private detective."

"Aha. Is that the capacity in which you are visiting our island?"

"No," I said, "I came here on vacation and then learned of the case. I thought I might be able to help."

"We have a quite large and competent police force, Mr. Bannon. You can be confident they will get to the bottom of this."

He smiled again.

"What is your friend's name?"

"If it's not terribly important, I'd rather not say just now."

"No, of course. You are our guest—we must respect your wishes."

"You're very kind."

"I would offer you a cigarette," the major said, "but I'm afraid I'm all out."

"Here, take one of mine." I reached my pack of Camels toward him and he lifted one out gratefully. I lit it for him and one for myself. He inhaled deeply, contentedly, and mopped tiny beads of perspiration from his shiny forehead.

"Well," he said, "just what would you like to know?"

"Any new developments since the story in Sunday's paper."

"I'm afraid there haven't been any. But that was only three days ago."

"Well then, how exactly did the harbor police learn that Rouget was on *La Mouette*?"

"Ah, I can't tell you that, Mr. Bannon. That is our little secret."

"Can you tell me if there was a life belt on Rouget's body when it was found?"

"No, there was not."

"Then the ship's captain was lying."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps Rouget removed the life belt himself, or it was beaten off by the waves and the rocks."

"That doesn't seem very likely."

"No," he agreed. He waited politely.

"Why does the captain say he put Rouget into the sea?"

"Fear of the police. He was afraid to become mixed up in anything questionable because of his record. I also personally believe he had bales of marijuana on board. Of course, they were no longer there when he put in at Ste. Anne."

"Why do you suspect there was marijuana?"

"An informant." He smiled. "How else does one find marijuana?"

"The same informant."

"Aha." He waggled a finger at me. "You are behaving too much like a private detective, Mr. Bannon. You must respect our little secrets."

He was quite a card. I was almost enjoying this.

"Were there any signs of violence on Rouget's body?" I asked. "The coroner's report must be in by now."

"Bruises, cuts, abrasions," Barrault said. "Nothing that could not have

been caused by being tossed about in a rough sea."

"Cause of death?"

He spread his big hands as if to show they contained nothing hidden. "Drowning, of course."

"Why did the captain later admit that Rouget had been on board?" I asked.

"We questioned him about it," Barrault said simply.

"And he had a sudden attack of guilty conscience."

He showed me his white teeth again.

"One last question," I said. "I realize your time is valuable. Why do you think Rouget had stowed away on that boat to Florida?"

"He was in trouble, of course," the major said, as if teaching the ABCs to a child. "Apparently very serious trouble. Even lawyers can get into serious trouble."

"Perhaps especially lawyers," I said.

He looked puzzled. He rubbed out his cigarette butt in a dirty ashtray. "Is there anything else, Mr. Bannon? You know, it has been a pleasure to practice my English."

"I would like to see the ship's captain," I said. "Maybe also one of the crew."

"I will see if it can be done," he said. "I will call you. Where are you staying?"

I gave him the name of the hotel. He wrote it down on his desk pad, under "rusty." I got up and we shook hands and parted like the best of friends.

After changing some money at the nearest bank, I gave a call to Dr. Martinez at his office. He was very interested in my talk with Major Barrault, but still unsatisfied with Barrault's reconstruction of Rouget's death.

I told him I was ready to see Rouget's apartment.

"I'll close up the office and take you there myself," he said. "The woman who manages the apartment house knows me; she'll let us in without any trouble."

It turned out as he'd predicted. The rather stern-looking, middle-aged mulatto unlocked the apartment for us and told us to call her when we were leaving, then went back downstairs to her own flat.

Rouget's apartment consisted of a living room, bedroom, study-library,

and office—all good-sized. The furnishings were old but of good quality, probably bought secondhand. I knew the police had been over the place earlier. The manager hadn't mentioned it and they had done a fairly neat job, but I could tell.

From all appearances, it was the apartment of a man without many interests aside from his work. There were two photographs in the living room, the first one of a couple well on in years and the second one of a woman—dark and pretty, about thirty. Dr. Martinez identified the first as Rouget's parents and the second as his wife, who had died about ten years ago. There was a healthy supply of liquor, mostly rum, in a kitchen cabinet.

In Rouget's office, a notepad next to the telephone had been torn down to a blank page—probably by the police. I pulled off the blank page to study later, though I couldn't see much in the way of impressions on it. Then I searched in vain for the address book that a lawyer would be sure to have around. The police again. Piles of papers on his desk and wall shelves I judged useless; if they hadn't been, they wouldn't still be there.

I went into the library and looked over Rouget's books. He read good literature, mostly in French. All the major French authors were represented and a good number of American, British, and Russian. His taste ran to fiction. There was no book entitled *White Hibiscus* or anything that sounded remotely like it. I checked several anthologies of stories, but came up with another zero.

That left the bedroom. Three impressionist prints on the walls—good quality. A closet with a normal amount of clothes, on the conservative side, and a dresser covered with perhaps a little more than the normal amount of toilet articles, including hair dye.

There was nothing of interest in the bathroom medicine chest. There was nothing much of interest in the whole damn flat.

"A waste of time," I said to Martinez. "The police have been over it thoroughly."

He shrugged. "What will you do next?"

"Take a long walk and do some thinking."

"Do you want me to come with you?"

"No, I think better alone. Besides, there's your office."

"I can be out for the rest of the day."

"No. I'll phone you around dinnertime. We'll get a bite to eat somewhere if you have no other plans."



He said he hadn't, and we called to the manager to come up and lock the apartment. She tried to talk to us about what had happened to Rouget, but we fended off her questions, thanked her, and went out into the dazzling street. Martinez started back to his office and I turned down in the direction of the harbor.

I didn't think the place looked like my Puerto Rico at all—not even twenty years ago. It was too squalid. The people were noisy and busy, but most of them looked dirty and underfed. The streets were narrow and fly-infested, and the beggars were out in force. According to what I had read in the newspapers, the President for Life owned nine cars, but most of his happy subjects couldn't even afford a bicycle from the looks of things. There were uniformed types everywhere, both military and police—if there was any difference between them in this island paradise.

But the harbor itself was pretty. Standing on the quay, you could look up the amphitheater of the town. The right arm of the U appeared to consist of small farms, and on the left arm was a long park and what looked to be a tourist restaurant at its very tip. Maybe a good place for dinner. Along the quay several big ships were anchored, each gangplank guarded by a uniformed soldier. I checked the names of the ships. There was no *White Hibiscus*, but there was *La Mouette*, a haggard-looking merchant vessel, steep-sided and black with once-white stacks. I didn't see a soul on her decks. Two soldiers, armed with rifles, stood at the foot of her gangplank. I couldn't think of any good reason for trying to board her.

Directly across the quay from *La Mouette* sat a pleasant-looking restaurant, and I went in for lunch. It was empty except for a couple of locals and two American tourists. That was when I first got the feeling.

I've been in my business a long time and I've run into just about everything; after a while you develop something like a sixth sense about being under surveillance. In the past I've almost always been right. And I'd never had that sixth sense shouting at me more urgently than it did just then. When I recognized it, I realized I'd had the feeling for a while—maybe as far back as leaving Dr. Martinez in front of Rouget's apartment.

It's not a nice feeling. It gives me a prickly sensation at the back of my neck, and the hairs on my arms feel like they're standing on end. My feet start tapping African drumbeats, and my usually inaudible heart starts

banging inside my eardrums. It's especially bad when you haven't noticed anyone out of the ordinary. I hadn't, and I didn't see anyone in the restaurant who gave me the impression of being a likely candidate.

I shifted in my chair and ran my eyes along the quay, but I couldn't spot anyone in the crowd who looked like a tail. Good tails don't look like tails, of course. Good tails are never there when you turn around. This was a good tail.

I ate lunch, then walked up the hill to my hotel, the sixth sense shouting all the way. Back in my room I poured myself a stiff drink from a bottle I'd picked up on the way, opened my sweaty shirtfront, and called down to the desk.

"Any calls for Mr. Bannon in 3C?" I asked in my shaky French.

The desk clerk said there had been one—a Major Barrault. He'd left a number. I dialed the number with the glass in my hand and took a swallow while it rang. He came on quickly.

"Ah, Mr. Bannon. I have good news for you. You may see the captain of *La Mouette*."

"Fine," I said. "I really appreciate it."

"We try to be hospitable to visitors," he said. "Besides, who knows? You may help us with our case."

"It's possible," I said.

"Come to my office as soon as you can. I will personally take you to the captain."

"Where is he?" I asked.

"In the city prison, of course."

"Yes, of course. I'll be right over."

A good tail does not stand in a doorway across the street from your hotel waiting for you to come out. A good tail is never where you'd expect. The best tail is the one that changes faces on you every half hour. If they have the men. If there is a "they."

Barrault was ready to go when I arrived. He grabbed his hat off a filing cabinet and led the way.

The city prison looked like something out of Dumas; it moldered about two blocks from Police Headquarters. And if the room where they let me see the captain was the one they showed to visitors, I didn't want to imagine what the cells were like.

"What's his name?" I asked Barrault while we waited.

"Trenet. Henri Trenet."

A few minutes later two policemen appeared at the door holding a gaunt, dirty-looking man by the arms. The major pointed wordlessly to a chair in front of us. The man sat down slowly. Once seated, his hands hanging between his legs, he avoided our eyes. His face was thin, creased, flat-nosed, and infinitely tired-looking. It was a face that had been through hell and managed to come back to talk about it. But I didn't think he would talk much about it. Not in his condition.

The major spoke to him in French. As near as I could make out, he was telling him that I was there to ask a few questions and he was to answer my questions. There was no response from that exhausted face.

"He speaks fairly good English," the major told me. "He has been sailing back and forth to Florida for many years now. That is where he sells his marijuana!" He barked the last word at the captain, but he only jumped slightly. By now, even their barking was losing its effect.

I leaned forward. "I would like to know why you put the lawyer into the sea," I said.

He spoke for the first time—in a voice as hollow and deep as an empty ship's hold.

"I was afraid."

"Of what?"

"Afraid of the police. Because of my past record. I did not want trouble."

He answered without looking at me, his eyes fixed on some point between my knees and Major Barrault's. I had the odd sensation that I was listening to a record playing.

"Did you know who he was?"

"Yes. I have him searched."

"Did you give him a life belt?"

"Yes. It was not far to land. I think he can swim there."

"But when the body was found, it had no life belt."

He raised his bleary eyes to mine. He didn't say anything.

"With a life belt he shouldn't have drowned," I said.

"The sea very rough around there," Trenet said.

"Why didn't you keep pretending you had never seen Rouget?"

He attempted something like a sick, cracked smile—or so it seemed. This time I lowered my head.

"I don't seem to be learning anything," I said to Barrault.

The major smiled at me, a smile that all but said "I told you so."

"Did you do anything to Rouget before you put him into the sea?" I asked Trenet.

He shook his head—a weary no.

"Would it be possible to speak to him for a couple of minutes alone?" I asked Barrault.

"Ah, I'm afraid that's impossible," the major said. "That would be very—how do you say in English?—irregular."

"The very word," I said.

He looked complimented.

"In that case, I guess I'm through," I said. "I'm sorry to have wasted your time, and my own."

"Oh, think nothing of it," the major said amiably.

"Are any of the rest of the crew here in the prison?" I asked.

"No, just the captain. We had no evidence against the others."

Since when would that have stopped you? I thought. "Who was second in command on board?" I asked.

"That would be the first mate. Let me see, I believe his name is Pilon."

"How would I find him?"

"I have his address, of course. He lives here in the city. But for that we must return to my office."

"I'd appreciate it," I said.

"My pleasure," said the major. We got up. They pulled Trenet to his feet, a policeman holding each arm as before to keep him from crumpling. So much for Henri Trenet.

I left Barrault's office with Pilon's address and directions how to get there. His house was on the far side of town, and Barrault recommended I take a taxi. I found one in the main square and we headed north. It was a ten-minute drive.

At the end of it, I told the cabby to sit tight and have a cigarette or me. I would need a ride back.

As we'd come across town, I had kept an eye out the back window. In those narrow streets it would be easy to spot a car following us, but I didn't spot any. I didn't have the sensation of being tailed any more either.

It bothered me that I didn't have it.

Pilon's house was cheap, flat-roofed cement, maybe three rooms in all. In front of it ragged chickens pecked in the dirt. There was a gaudy

orange rug hung over the low porch wall—to be dusted? The whole neighborhood was like that.

The front door was open and I could see two curly-headed kids, a boy and a girl, playing noisily inside. I mounted the four steps and called loudly. The kids froze and stared at me. A woman materialized at a door to the left. She asked what I wanted.

She was probably thirty but looked forty. Her hair was full of giant pink curlers, and she was running to fat. A cheap green dress hung from her like a tent, revealing only heavy breasts and thick legs.

I stammered in my poor French that I wanted to see her husband. She said he wasn't there. I asked when he'd be back. She looked as if she wasn't sure and suggested maybe at supper time, about 7:00. My watch read 4:05, so I told her I'd come back later. She just looked at me—no doubt with a mind bursting with questions. My French wasn't good enough even to make up a satisfactory story for her. I left her and the kids staring at me.

Major Barrault had said he thought Pilon probably spoke some English. Thank God for large favors.

The taxi turned around in the dusty road and we started back to town. When we got there the cabby overcharged me shamelessly.

I called Dr. Martinez's office from my hotel to arrange about meeting for dinner. When I proposed trying the restaurant at the end of the harbor, he said that was fine with him, but he couldn't vouch for the place, he'd never eaten there—it was mostly for tourists. I suggested it might be nice to feel like a tourist for an hour or so.

Martinez dropped by the hotel at six and we decided to walk to the restaurant. The heat of the day had blown off. As we descended through town, various pungent smells hit us: coffee, molasses, tobacco leaves, sewage, greasy cooking. In the park we passed a gigantic statue of the President for Life in a military uniform, looking fat and authoritarian. The restaurant, named Le Phare, was large, bright, and full of tourists. They gave us a table near one of the big picture windows that looked out over the entrance of the harbor. It was growing dark, and scattered lights were coming on in the town.

I let Martinez do the ordering for both of us from the oversized menu. "It's rather expensive," he said. "I suppose they think the Americans can afford it." He lit an American cigarette. "So what have you accomplished today?"

I gave him an account of my afternoon. It didn't sound as if I had accomplished a hell of a lot. Possibly my major accomplishment had been to get myself followed.

"But you can't be sure of that," Dr. Martinez said.

"I'm pretty damned sure."

He looked a little scared. "If you're right, there's more to this than Trenet's story."

"As you suspected from the beginning. We've got to find out what happened on that ship."

"Have you a theory?"

"I haven't reached the theory stage yet—or at least the stage of talking about my theories. Tonight I'm going to try to see Pilon again."

"If the captain wouldn't tell the truth, why should Pilon?"

"Pilon is not being charged with manslaughter by the police. They said they had no evidence against anyone except Trenet. The evidence, I suppose, being his confession."

"If you can call it that," Dr. Martinez said dryly.

"He looked pretty bad."

"I would be curious to visit Pilon with you," Martinez said, "but I don't see how I can. I'm leaving on a business trip to San Juan early tomorrow morning. This evening I have to pack the paintings I'm bringing."

"I didn't know."

"It's been planned for weeks. I make these trips periodically."

"When will you get back?"

"Friday afternoon. You know, I can sell as many paintings and as much wood sculpture in San Juan as I can bring them. These people are natural artists, if there is such a thing."

I looked at his greying temples and his trimmed moustache. "I must say that you still look more like a distinguished professor than a businessman," I said.

He colored under his tan at what he took to be a compliment, then his expression suddenly changed. "Did you find anything on that leaf from Louis's telephone pad?"

"Damn, I forgot all about it. It's in the shirt I was wearing this morning. I'll look at it when I get back. But don't expect much, that only pans out in Sherlock Holmes."

He laughed. "I'll be curious," he said.

The waiter arrived with our food. The oval plates were decorated with

sprigs of parsley and stuffed olives like works of art. The food was all right.

We separated in front of my hotel. Dr. Martinez went home to pack his paintings and I continued on toward the taxi stand on the main square. On the way up from the restaurant, Martinez had asked me if I thought we were being followed, and I'd said no. But it didn't make much sense that I should be followed some times and not others. I mulled this over as I walked through the narrow, poorly lit streets that gave onto the square from this direction. It was the kind of city where dark alleys sat side by side with brightly lit thoroughfares. I liked this—the constant surprises as you turned corners.

There was only one other person in sight, walking far ahead of me. We were on a narrow street of small shops, all closed up tight for the night. The square was about a block ahead.

Still, when he came out of the doorway at me I wasn't completely surprised. He was a big shadowy figure with something long and heavy-looking in his hand that glistened in the moonlight like polished wood. A *macana*. I dodged hard toward the gutter, and the big club swished by my head close enough to shave off a few hairs. He recovered his balance instantly and aimed another terrific blow at my stomach. I ran.

Stupidly, I wasn't carrying my gun. I strained toward the lights ahead. The square would be full of people. The giant with the club was right behind me. I could hear his heavy footsteps and his heavier breathing. Then, as I was almost to the square, his footsteps seemed to fall back. I broke into the open and found myself in a host of lights, cars, and people. And the footsteps were gone.

I looked back, breathing like a spent marathon runner. The street was deserted. Had he gone into some doorway? I could find a cop and go back to look for him. I took out my handkerchief and wiped my face. Sweat was streaming down my backbone. My right shoulder hurt.

From now on I'd carry the damned gun. I had taken a risk smuggling it in with my luggage on the plane. From now on, I'd enjoy the benefits of that risk.

I walked wearily toward the taxi stand on the opposite side of the square, feeling like an old man walking like that.

The cabby was happy to wait outside the house and calculate how much he should overcharge me.

Pilon's place was lighted, the front door open as it had been that afternoon. A hospitable fellow, Pilon. I walked up the cement steps and stood at the door. Inside, sitting on an old stuffed armchair, was a man of about forty in a t-shirt and baggy pants. He was on the pudgy side, with short curly hair, and he needed a shave. The two kids were on his lap. He looked up when I rapped at the door.

"Mr. Pilon?"

He didn't answer. He set the children down, got up, and walked toward me. I couldn't tell if he liked what he saw, but he gave me a thorough once-over.

"Do you speak English?" I asked.

He nodded vaguely. His wife was now standing at a door to the left. She said something in French that I didn't catch. He said something to her which sounded like, "Get the hell out of here and take the kids." The boy and girl went to their mother and the three of them disappeared.

"Who are you? What you want?" His tone wasn't friendly.

"I'm investigating the death of the lawyer, Rouget. My name is Bannon. I'm a private detective."

"What it has to do with you?"

"A friend of Rouget's hired me to try to find out what happened."

"Already the police investigate," he said. "The police know what happen."

"My employer doesn't believe the story of *La Mouette's* captain."

"Get out," he said. There was a definite threat in that "get out."

"I just wanted to ask you one or two questions."

"No questions. What the captain say is true. Get out."

"If it's true, why did someone try to kill me tonight?" I said.

"I don't know. Get out." He took a step closer, looking ready to swing.

"Trenet was 'interrogated' by the police. He'd confess to anything."

The mate was biting the inside of his upper lip. "I know nothing," he said. "The captain the one who knows. You not even from our island."

His right fist was balled and he was biting his lip harder. I figured, the hell with it. I'd never get anything out of this one. He was hiding something, afraid of something, but I'd never get it. And I wasn't in the mood for a useless fight after my experience with the giant.

"All right," I said. I turned and walked down the steps. He stood in the opening, watching me.

"And don't come back!" he yelled.



I didn't bother to answer. The cabby was looking at me very curiously as I got in. I didn't bother to answer his look either.

The first thing I did when I got back to my room was unpack my .38 and load it with five rounds. The second thing I did was take a shower (with the .38 on the washstand beside the tub). There was a pretty yellow bruise on my shoulder.

When I toweled off, I found the sheet of memo paper in my shirt pocket and smoothed it out under the table light. It was too faint to read that way, so I got a pencil from my suitcase and fanned the side of the lead very lightly across the surface of the paper. The impressions came up clearly. There was nothing there to read though—no words at all, just simple doodles of flowers such as one might make abstractedly while talking on the telephone. And they weren't hibiscus or even close to hibiscus—they looked more like daisies. But they got me to thinking again about white hibiscus.

I stuck the gun under my pillow, flicked off the light, and crawled into bed to sleep the sleep of the hard-working, the misunderstood, and the frustrated.

The phone woke me at 7:00 A.M. It was Dr. Martinez. He said he was calling from the airport.

"What happened with Pilon?"

"Nothing. He wouldn't tell me a thing. He wouldn't talk to me."

"Do you think he knows anything?"

"Oh, yes."

He made a grunting sort of noise. "And the sheet from the telephone pad?"

"Some doodles that look like daisies."

"That's all?"

"That's all."

"Well," he said, sounding very disappointed, "I'll see you tomorrow."

"What time are you getting in?"

"About five."

"Give me a call."

"Yes, of course," he said. "Well, good luck."

"That's *just* what we need," I said. "A little piece of luck."

He rang off.

I turned over and went back to sleep. It wasn't hard.

At 10:15 the phone rang again. By then I felt I could stand to face the world for another day. This time it was the genial Major Barrault.

"Good morning, Mr. Bannon. I was afraid I would not find you in."

"I'm a late riser."

"I just received a phone call about Pilon, the first mate on *La Mouette*."

"I went to see him last night."

"Yes, I know. It seems he's disappeared. His family's very anxious. Would you know anything about that, Mr. Bannon?"

"No," I said. "I'm as surprised as you are."

"What exactly happened last night?"

"I got there about a quarter to nine, told him who I was and what I wanted to know, and he threw me out."

"Did he seem afraid?"

"Not of me."

The major chuckled. "I appreciate your humor, Mr. Bannon. You didn't by any chance suggest to Pilon that he was in danger?"

"No, why should I? When did he disappear?"

"According to his wife, he went out—for a drink, he said—as soon as you left. He didn't say when he would be back. But he always came back home when he went drinking at night—no matter how late. Last night he didn't. When he was still not back at eight this morning his wife made inquiries at all the local bars. Then she checked with his usual drinking companions in the neighborhood. No one had seen him. Finally she called the police. She is very worried. She seems to connect his disappearance with your visit and that ugly business on *La Mouette*."

"A natural connection," I agreed.

"Well, if you hear anything of him, I want to know," Major Barrault said. His tone suggested it was not exactly a request.

"Of course," I said.

I rubbed sleep out of my eyes. Why would Pilon's wife call the police? These people hated the police. On the other hand, who else would she call if she was really worried and couldn't find a trace of her husband? I got up and pulled on some clothes and strapped on the revolver. Maybe I could think better after two cups of coffee.

A lot of the unscrambling in investigative work goes on unconsciously. What seems like an intuition or a sudden bright light has been coalescing in your brain all the time—especially, I think, during sleep. Then something triggers it to the surface, and things seem suddenly to fit together.

Well, around 2:30 that afternoon, after a few hours of spinning my wheels and walking around town, my bright light came.

It came in the recognition of the difference between my character and Louis Rouget's. If you said "white hibiscus" to me I would—as had Dr. Martinez—think first that it was the name of a night club, a hotel, a ship, or a novel—something like that, a title. But Louis Rouget was a man who doodled daisies while on the telephone and who read serious literature by the world's great writers. Louis Rouget liked the French impressionists, used hair dye, and kept a picture of his old parents in the living room. To Louis Rouget, the white hibiscus was, first and foremost, a flower.

Up to then I hadn't thought to look for the flower itself.

I left the small outdoor bar where I had just swallowed a beer and started up the hill toward what looked like the highest point in town. If Rouget meant for Martinez to find white hibiscus after "something happened" to him, then it might not be too hard to find. From the top of town, with a view of the entire harbor, one might find it. It sounded far-fetched, but nothing else made sense.

Gulls swooped down over the water, and a big boat was slowly navigating out to the open sea. I stood on an old stone wall bordering the road. The city dropped below me to the blue-green bay. On the left of the U; the park and Le Phare restaurant; on the right, small farms and scattered houses. The sky was almost clear blue and the sun was very bright so that the large rectangular patch of white near the end of the right arm of the bay was blindingly obvious to someone looking for it—nothing else in sight competed. The wall of a farm was densely fronted with white flowers and, though I couldn't tell at this distance whether they were hibiscus, I was willing to bet on it.

I didn't feel I was being followed, but I used all the tricks up my sleeve to make sure of it before I got anywhere near the wall and the farmhouse behind it.

I had never seen so much hibiscus in one place. For three days I had been blind to the most obvious clue imaginable. What a wonderful private eye I was. I wanted to congratulate myself with a kick in the pants.

A dirt path led through the wall to the house. On both sides of the path grew lemon and orange trees. Bordering the property, against a metal fence, I could see a row of plantains and also an area of turned-up fresh soil, either recently planted or about to be. The door was open.

I took out my revolver, clicked off the safety, and walked up to the door. Inside, it looked cool and shadowy. My eyes took a few moments to adjust. The furnishings in the room were simple, old, rustic. A wide-shouldered, grey-haired man was sitting on a chair facing me. He was sharpening a long, black-handled machete.

"Come in, Mr. Bannon," he said. "I was wondering when you'd finally get here."

For his years, he was solidly built and powerful-looking. He had shiny ebony skin like Major Barrault's, but a face that I liked better. I'd never seen him before.

"Take a chair," he said. "You can put the gun away. You won't need it."

I took a chair—straight-backed, wooden, and uncomfortable—but I kept the gun in my hand. "How do you know who I am?"

"We've had our eye on you almost since you arrived."

A door swung open to my right and a younger man appeared, as black and solid-looking as the other, dressed in jeans and a sleeveless undershirt. "My son," the older man said.

The son crossed his arms over his chest and stood looking at me. The old man still sharpened the machete with his stone. He seemed more interested in his work than in me. The weight of the .38 against my palm made me feel a little better.

"Are you the people who tried to club me to death?" I asked, trying to sound as matter-of-fact as he did.

"No, that was the police. They have also been keeping an eye on you."

That came as no great surprise. "I couldn't be more curious," I said.

"Yes, I'm sure. Well, I will tell you as much as you need to know. The government here is not popular; I'm sure you are aware of that. There are—groups—that would like to see it changed. You have inadvertently involved yourself with one of these groups, Mr. Bannon. Louis Rouget was working with us."

"I've thought for some time that the police had him killed, but I didn't know why."

"They didn't exactly have him killed. We ourselves weren't sure what happened on *La Mouette* until this morning."

"What happened this morning?"

"We kidnapped Pilon. We talked to him."

"Where is Pilon now?"

"That need not concern you," he said. "Please put the gun away. You are in no danger from us."

I holstered the gun, and he nodded approvingly.

"What happened on *La Mouette*?" I asked.

"Louis had been identified as a member of our group to the police. We warned him and he tried to escape the island, but there was really no time to prepare a very efficient escape. The police discovered which boat he was on. They didn't believe the captain when he radioed that there was no one aboard. Before *La Mouette* put in at Ste. Anne a police cutter had reached it.

"Louis was afraid he would be forced to talk, so he dove into the sea and drowned. And since the government doesn't like to advertise that groups such as ours exist—they would like the world to think everyone is happy here—they needed an explanation of Louis' death. For this purpose Captain Trenet became the—as you might say—fall guy. Since he has cooperated so well, he will probably be out of prison in six months."

"Aren't the police afraid someone on the crew will tell the truth?"

"You don't fully appreciate how people regard the police here. There is little danger of that."

"If I were you," I told him, "I'd chop down all that white hibiscus out front. Sooner or later the police will wake up."

"I'm one step ahead of you," he said. "That is why I'm sharpening this machete. We were aware that Dr. Martinez was making inquiries about white hibiscus and we guessed why. Louis must have thought he would want to join us."

"Louis drank a little too much, I suspect."

"True," he agreed.

I did some thinking aloud. "From the beginning, the marijuana angle looked like a red herring invented by Major Barrault. I couldn't make it fit. It was clear the police liked Trenet's story just the way it was, which meant it was probably a lie. But I'd like to know how they found out about Rouget."

"Dr. Martinez told them, of course. Dr. Martinez is working for the police. That's why he hired you—to help them root us out."

I felt I'd suddenly dropped through a black hole into space. My head was whirling. "That makes no sense," I said desperately. "Then why would the police have tried to kill me?"

"They didn't. They knew your character, Mr. Bannon. You would never stop investigating after an incident like that. It convinced you that you must be on the right track."

So I had been the golf ball in Major Barrault's expert game. At the end of the game, I would have been hit into eternity.

"They didn't follow me here," I said.

"I know."

He regarded me with something like sympathy. "It's an evil world, Mr. Bannon. Just when you think you've got your footing, the ground shifts from under you. It's not easy to keep on your feet for seventy-odd years. Most people fall."

I took out my cigarettes and lit one. It tasted rotten.

"You are going to leave the island," the black man continued, "as soon as possible. We will assist you. You had best forget all about Dr. Martinez—and everything else. We will sweep up the broken pieces of this affair."

"You have a turn for metaphor," I said. It sounded bitter, but the bitterness was not directed at him.

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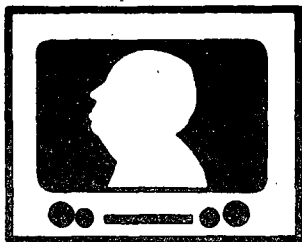
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# CRIME ON SCREEN

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by Peter Christian

"I feel all dead inside. I'm backed up in a dark corner and I don't know who's hitting me." Mark Stevens utters this cry of anguish in the 1946 thriller, *The Dark Corner*, but it could express as well the despair of all the troubled figures in that extraordinary American movie genre, the *film noir*. Recently scholars Alain Silver and Elizabeth Ward have presented mystery enthusiasts with a hefty tribute to crime cinema in the pages of *Film Noir: An Encyclopedic Reference to the American Style* (Overlook Press, \$25), a feast of fists and fear so engaging and nostalgic that it lights up a fascinating and shadowy period of American film that is, along with the Western, our most important contribution to world cinema.

*Film noir* is literally crime on screen, dark dramas of mystery, vengeance, and escape churned from that unsettling period of our country following World War II. How did such a wholly American movie form get a French name? Because the French first discerned these elements in a growing number of United States motion pictures, and called them such after their own "Serie Noire" books of detective fiction which had been publishing the work of Chandler, Hammett, and Cain. So an American film style was dubbed—"black" not only because of the crime themes of its pulp origins but because of the dark shadowy cinematography which seemed to be its overpowering visual stamp, a style inherited in part from the many foreign refugee directors (Lang, Siodmak, Wilder,

Ulmer, and others), trained in European Expressionism, who thrived on tales of alienated souls caught in a sinister metropolis, struggling against a faceless nemesis. The settings are typically dark streets lit by flashing neon or the blinking roar of a passing overhead train. They are, as the titles warn us, *Somewhere in the Night*, *In a Lonely Place*, *On Dangerous Ground*, *Dead End*.

Many films could vie for the honor, but RKO's 1944 *Murder, My Sweet* is perhaps the quintessential *noir* film—the essence of its dark drama in its purest and most concentrated form, and the perfect model for several decades of movies to follow. Drawn closely from Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*, with the book's title carefully changed so no one could mistake the hard grit of its outlook, the motion picture version presents the ominous and disordered world, the dark streets of Chandler's Los Angeles nightside, completely from private detective Philip Marlowe's point of view. The entire film except for a brief prologue and epilogue is in flashback, as the cynical, vulnerable Marlowe "tells" the story in Chanderlesque narrative style. ("I gave her a drink. She was the kind of gal who would take a drink if she had to knock you over to get it.") We advance through a threatening and grotesque landscape almost as one with Marlowe, listening to his thoughts, feeling his fear. The first-person narrative of the soundtrack, borrowed from pulp detective styles, was not a common movie device but was shortly to become associated with the hard-boiled private-eye film in its flourishing heyday. And Chandler was to contribute much more to crime on screen.

Two years later, *The Big Sleep*, with Humphrey Bogart as Marlowe, presented an underworld even more chaotic and bizarre, even more corrupt and decayed. Already in 1944 Chandler had collaborated with Billy Wilder in bringing James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity* to the screen, and without the soundtrack narrative by doomed insurance-agent Fred MacMurray—again the whole film is told in flashback as he lies wounded, close to finishing his "ride to the end of the line"—the movie would not have been half so harshly powerful.

In 1946, in *The Blue Dahlia*, Chandler gave us a disillusioned, disoriented veteran seeking the murderer of his unfaithful wife, a postwar theme reused many times by others as the *noir* tradition built. Even lesser triumphs such as *The Brasher Doubloon* (1947), based on Chandler's *The High Window*, with George Montgomery as Marlowe, and the later *Marlowe* (1969) with a breezy James Garner in the title role (inter-



estingly, the actor has become on television in the 1970s the standard image of a private eye) in a plot not badly adapted from *The Little Sister*, are still stridently potent.

Many of the writers for *Black Mask* magazine also found outlets in the Hollywood *noirs*, and it is interesting to track the contributions of prolific giants such as Cornell Woolrich. His short story, "Nightmare," was filmed twice, first as *Fear in the Night* in 1947, then nine years later under its original title. In it a man dreams he kills another in a strange mirrored room, which he then locks. After he wakes he discovers the key and a button from the victim's jacket in his pocket—could it have not been a dream after all? Certain he is a murderer, he confesses to his police-captain brother-in-law, and together they search for the house with the mirror room. They find it, with corpse. *The Chase* (1946), taken from his *The Black Path of Fear*, is also partially told in flashback, and has a war veteran protect a gangster's abused wife only to be accused of her murder. Last-minute reprieves were a Woolrich specialty. In *Convicted* (1938), Rita Hayworth clears her brother of killing a gold-digger on the very day of his execution. Both *Phantom Lady* (1944) and *Black Angel* (1946) feature central characters desperately trying to unearth evidence that can free loved ones facing the electric chair for murders they did not commit—in each case the trails lead into nightmarish demiworlds, and both these films are moody masterpieces.

Even low-budget adaptations of Woolrich works dashed off by poverty-row studios such as Monogram have a certain compelling style. *Fall Guy* (1947), from "Cocaine," has the hero awaken covered with blood and accused of the murder of a girl he had met at a party but cannot remember; the movie title gives a clue to his plight. In *The Guilty* (1947), which has a complex, surprising plot worthy of far more than a small-studio "quickie" retelling, a young man returns to an old neighborhood to track down the killer of his girl's twin sister a year before. *I Wouldn't Be in Your Shoes* (1948) has a cheap rooming-house setting, Woolrich's favorite locale. An out-of-work vaudevillian rashly tosses a custom-made dance shoe outside at a howling cat one dark night and the next morning learns the shoe has implicated him in a murder. Even the Woolrich stories used in the Columbia "Whistler" films, *Mark of the Whistler* (1944) and *Return of the Whistler* (1948)—stories in which a vagrant assumes another man's identity and a bride disappears on her wedding night—elevate that series. And *The Window* (1949), a tenement saga drawn from "The Boy Cried

Murder," won an Edgar Allan Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America as the best mystery film of the year.

Noir images and dialogue are unmistakable. "I'm nobody's friend," says grim-jawed Robert Montgomery in *Ride the Pink Horse*, and, in truth, the heroes of the genre share a uniformly bleak outlook. Unquestionably the most bleak is the outlook faced by Edmond O'Brien in *D.O.A.*, who spends his last hours tracking down his own murderer, the unknown person who apparently without motive has fed him a deadly poison.

Glenn Ford, the rogue cop in Fritz Lang's *The Big Heat*, goes outside the machinery of the law to bring down the "big heat" which will destroy a syndicate king who had killed his wife.

Max Thursday (Zachary Scott) of *Guilty Bystander*, a cop dismissed from the force for alcoholism, descends further down a particularly sordid underworld to discover who had kidnapped his small son.

*Stranger on the Third Floor*, a brilliant but forgotten 1940 RKO film, has a newspaper reporter, confident at first that no man can be railroaded for a crime, discover to his horror that he is being accused of a murder actually committed by a grotesque, scarred man lurking in his deteriorating neighborhood (Peter Lorre in a totally wordless role). Made a full year before *Citizen Kane* at the same studio, this film anticipates much of its cinematic trickery, weaving it into a mood of claustrophobia and paranoia.

"Do you know the world is a foul sty? Do you know if you ripped the fronts off houses you'd find swine?" This is Uncle Charlie's point of view in Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*, a different (indeed sunlit) kind of noir film. Most of the people in noir are either helpless or venal—women, especially—and it has become a tradition of the genre for *femmes fatales* to destroy and often be destroyed. ("You counted on your beauty with guys, even the ones you were going to kill," says Alan Ladd at the end of *Calcutta*, echoing the climaxes of *The Maltese Falcon*, *Double Indemnity*, and countless other films.)

Even the titles cry out the erotic danger at the core of some films: *Killer's Kiss*, *Kiss of Death*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Kiss the Blood Off My Hands*. Women can be haunting as well as deadly. "I never cared about the money. All I wanted was you. I walked the streets of strange cities thinking about you," confesses the hero of *Criss-Cross* to his ex-wife, but the reunion is ultimately violent. It is a dark world, and, as the Swede says in *The Killers*, "Everybody dies."

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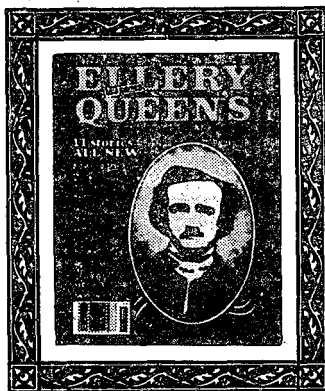
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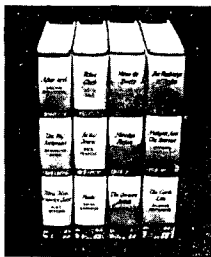
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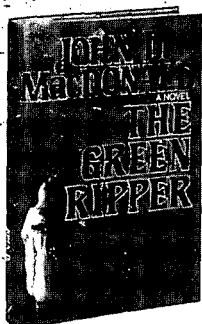
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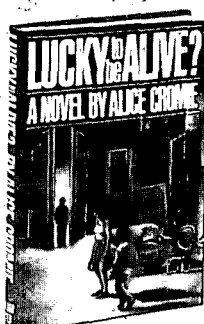
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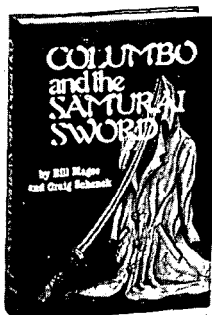
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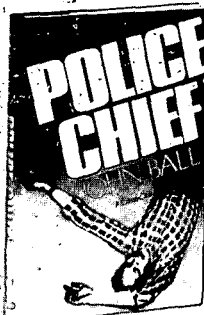
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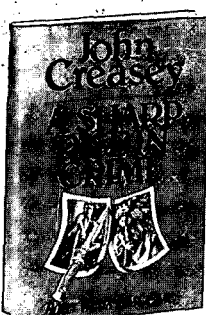
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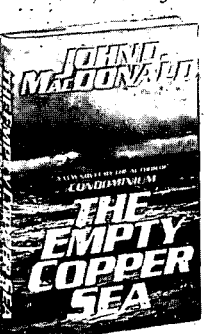
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